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from an Oregon Ranch



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From An Oregon Ranch

FROM AN OREGON RANCH

Stephens, Louise G.

BY
"KATHARINE"

Decorations by
J. Allen St. John



CHICAGO
A. C. McCLURG & CO.

1916

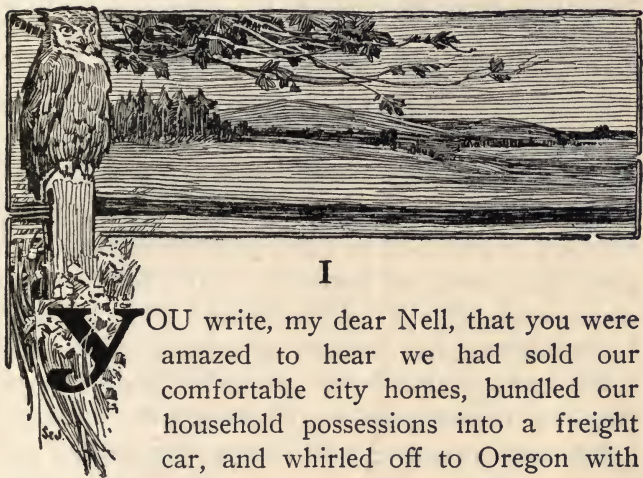
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“MORNING and evening the hills throw welcome shadows; in the valleys are sun-warmed gaps, while far and wide stretches a lovely landscape in which the tracks of animals are seen oftener than those of men. Deep and undisturbed silence reigns everywhere, only broken now and then by the murmur of falling waters, the lowing of cattle, and the songs of birds.”

From “My Study Fire,” Hamilton W. Mabie.

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I

YOU write, my dear Nell, that you were amazed to hear we had sold our comfortable city homes, bundled our household possessions into a freight car, and whirled off to Oregon with the foolish and pastoral notion of locating on ranches; and thereupon you had indignantly remarked, "The whole quartet must be as mad as March hares to do such a reckless thing at their time of life." The allusion to lunacy may be forgiven; to age, never. We may not be so young as we used to be, but we are not yet quite in our dotage. Don't

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you know, my friend, that monotony is stagnation and death to the middle-aged? They need change of scene, and the novelty and excitement that come with it. The tonic of fresh fields and pastures new is both stimulating and rejuvenating, and the Oregon air is an intoxicant like wine — pure, fresh, and exhilarating. We drank it in with praise and thanksgiving.

You ask if we have found our ranch. I answer, Yes. Do we like it? We are delighted with it. How did we find it? It happened rather strangely. Last summer, in a purely accidental way, there drifted to us a little pamphlet from a real estate agent, in which we learned more than we had ever known of the beauties and attractions of Oregon. We read of her glorious snow-capped mountains, of great dim forests, of sparkling trout-laden streams, of wooded hills and blossoming valleys, swiftly flowing rivers, and fern-shaded springs of delicious cold water gushing from rock and hillside. From that hour the madness was in our blood. We said, Let us act at once, and not stand shivering on the brink. And so the leap into the unknown was taken, landing us in a small town here in the height of the rainy season. Then, “under skies that were ashen and sober,” in prosy fact as well as poetic figure, began the search for our new homes. It was like searching for the Golden Fleece.

In response to an inquiry concerning real estate

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agents — strange coincidence! — the first name suggested was one already familiar to us as the author of the little book whose beguiling eloquence had led us across mountains, plains, and desert to the promised land. Under his monitions we at once took possession of the only vacant house in the town — a small leaky-roofed cottage in an advanced state of decay — unpacked a few goods, merely enough with which to do “light housekeeping,” while our lords were searching for the new Arcadia. Day after day they went forth, clad in brand-new glistening rubber suits, almost as hideous as a diver’s outfit, we tossing old shoes after them for luck. Night invariably brought them home, tired, hungry, and disappointed. There was always something wrong with the places they had seen: the ranches were either too large or too small; not enough tillable land, or too much tillable land and a scarcity of timber; either no water on the place, or a deluge of it, submerging a good portion of the estate. So it went on day after day, week in and week out, until we began to compare ourselves to Martin Chuzzlewit and Mark Tapley in search of their Eden in the Indiana swamps.

But at last, one glad day, capricious Fate, relenting, led our brave scouts straight up the green and shining hills of Paradise into the country of the Pointed Firs, where in a little emerald basin they found the enchanted land. The place was large

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enough to be divided into two ranches, each provided with both tillable and wood land. There was great rejoicing, a hurrying to and fro, a hasty repacking of goods, and much searching for means of their transportation. It was difficult to find men willing to brave the horrors of the mountain roads with loaded wagons during the rainy season. But after a delay of two days, three men with teams reluctantly consented to come to our rescue, which they did, but bringing no tarpaulin or any kind of protection for our goods. We had one outfit of our own; and when the four wagons pulled out, Mary and I could not but look a bit regretfully after our household treasures, exposed to both rain and mud during a drive of twenty miles. Owing to the almost impassable condition of the roads, only light loads could be taken; consequently eight long days were spent in this herculean task.

The men drove up one day and back the next, passing the intervening night in the old deserted home. Finally came the glad morning of our release from the leaky, dismal, and now plundered cottage. The last load was vanishing down the street. At the door stood our newly acquired surrey — a second-hand one, a queer looking old thing, not unlike a palanquin on wheels. It was loaded to the guards. As we stowed ourselves away within its gloomy interior, the school children, at the risk of tardy marks, halted to witness the imposing start,

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nudging one another and giggling furtively at the remarkable equipage and its load.

We started out, with Tom holding the reins and a yard of breakfast bacon, while his knees clasped a five-gallon can of kerosene. Bert was clinging desperately to a cuckoo clock, a sugar-cured ham, and a huge sheaf of rose cuttings. He sat so embowered in green leaves that he resembled a May Queen. Mary breathed heavily under the burden of eight pounds of creamery butter and a kerosene lamp with a very large shade—a most aggressive thing, with javelin-like points. Forming a sort of barricade in front of me were piled a dozen loaves of baker's bread, four boxes of shredded wheat biscuit, and two roasted chickens. Add to these things three umbrellas, two satchels, a lunch basket, and a horse collar, and do you wonder the children giggled? Why that horse collar was with us remains a dark mystery to this day.

As we left the village, a dense fog prevailed, for which we were rather grateful, as it proved an effective screen for our disreputable exit. We were hoping it might lift later, as we knew there were fine views of Mount Hood, Mount Jefferson, and the Three Sisters *en route*; but instead of dissipating, it gradually thickened, until we were enveloped in a heavy gray vapor, giving us a strange sense of isolation. All landmarks vanished; the world slipped away; we seemed afloat on a "wide, wide

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sea." We could see absolutely nothing except our patient toiling horses, and occasionally the dim outlines of an old rail fence. Upon a fence post we saw, like a lone sentry, a great brown owl, as motionless and rigid as if cast in bronze. Once from a near-by field came the clear voice of a meadow lark. Strangely sweet were those divine notes floating up from that misty obscurity.

We had started out in the morning quite hilarious; but as the difficulties and dangers of the road increased, our talk grew desultory, and at last we rode in grim silence. The mud seemed bottomless, and the never-ending hills were so steep as to appear almost perpendicular. With locked wheels we slid down their precipitous sides, only to crawl up others that seemed steeper still, lurching into yawning chuck holes with such violence that the kerosene splashed and the green bower swayed from side to side. At such times Mary's lamp shade showed its evil nature. Glancing her way, I saw that it was useless to protest against its murderous attacks. Her feet were planted on the horse collar, her lips closed with Napoleonic firmness, her hat jammed over one eye, the other blazing with a high resolve to carry that lamp shade to its goal though her every living friend and relative should fall by the wayside. As we advanced, the woods grew denser, the road curving around narrow mountain ledges, above deep, dark canyons, where, crowding close, tier upon tier,

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in watchful guardianship, stood the somber sentinel firs. A slip of a foot or two, and we would have been hurled into the bottomless pit. A native Oregonian may pursue his serpentine way nonchalantly on the edge of these craters, but to a tenderfoot they bring pimples of gooseflesh, as night brings out the stars. For miles our advance seemed characterized by a succession of shudders. Twice did we ford mountain streams swollen by recent rains until they had become tumbling, boiling cataracts, with currents dangerously swift. These streams had rocky beds, and our old ark quivered and creaked on its stormy passage through them. As the foaming waves leaped for us, I shut my eyes, doubled up my toes, and thought that at last the end had come. When the rush of water ceased, I felt rather than saw that we were scrambling up the opposite bank, and, opening my eyes, saw the dripping horses once more upon *terra firma*.

I am sorry to take leave of you in the fog and gloom of the forest, with night coming on. But the night of this day is coming also, and with it comes Tom, striding down our woodsy hill like a hardy Norseman, upon his shoulder his shining axe gleaming as did "Excalibur" of old. That he is ravenously hungry goes without saying. So I must lay aside my pen and prepare our evening meal.



II

THE drizzling rain which began falling as we left the ford continued — well, I believe it continued until the following June. Crawling up the toilsome ascent, we suddenly entered a veritable Black Forest, a vast impenetrable solitude. Like woodland specters, the fir trees crept out of the gloom, standing in military ranks by the roadside, as if curious to note what manner of ghosts were these, lumbering in their strange craft up through the long green aisles. When halting, as we often did, to rest our tired horses, the silence was absolute. One would not think a great forest could be so breathlessly still. Could there anywhere be noise and tumult? Had not the eternal silence fallen upon the whole world, and we alone escaped the universal doom? It was an uncanny hush, with something of foreboding in it.

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A sort of unreasoning terror seized me, and I suddenly remembered stories we had been told of the cougar, the coyote, and the wildcat sometimes seen in this green wilderness. You may be sure that I fell a-thinking of them. Were they fond, I wondered, of roasted chicken and shredded wheat? Had they yet caught the scent of the bacon? That very instant lithe furry forms with glowing eyes might be crouching in the dark boughs above us, ready to leap upon our defenseless heads, or soft padded feet might be stealthily creeping over the thick velvety moss to attack us from below. Awed by that vast immensity, we rode on in silence, and not one living thing did we see or hear, not even the whir of wings. Looking backward now from the safe shelter of these four walls, I wish something had at least growled, just to lend a touch of interest to my narrative. The forest folk may have watched us from behind that leafy screen, but if so, they gave no hint of it. After a time we turned into a dim sketchy road of twilight gloom, made gloomier by the riotous undergrowth. Low-hanging boughs raked the surrey top, and long green fingers reached in at the sides, snatching maliciously at the lace-befrilled lamp shade. It was a "no thoroughfare" sort of place, but as we bumped along over stumps and poles, we were glad to learn that the agony would be brief. And so it proved, as we presently entered a wide lane, and with sighs of relief beheld open

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cleared spaces, with a very small house, a larger barn, and sheds innumerable. After passing several such places, we suddenly plunged down a steep declivity with a roaring torrent at its base, but stoutly bridged—blessed be the saints! Up one more rise, and the horses were stopped before a rickety paling fence, the driver remarking, “Now, if our lady of the loaves and fishes will glance up the heights, she will behold her future home.”

High upon a steep hillside we saw, through slanting rain and the fast-gathering shadows of night, a very tall house of two stories, grim, gaunt, unpainted, frowning down inhospitably upon us. It looked to be the fitting abode of hobgoblins, warlocks, and witches, plainly saying, “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.” Half dead with the fatigue and cramped positions of our long ride, we could scarcely stand after crawling from the ambulance. An infirm gate, lashed to its moorings with a bit of rope, fell as we passed through. Going up the muddy gulch leading to the house, I noticed five ugly, narrow, curtainless windows glaring at us, and I noted also the absence of a front porch. As in a vision, I saw the home we had left, with its wide shining windows, broad Colonial porch, and round white pillars. A painful lump rose in my throat, and just then and there came my first and last touch of homesickness.

Steps of rough slabs led up to the front entrance

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of the house; the steps were presumably six in number originally, but now the two lower ones were missing. As a final note of desolation, upon one of these steps stood a rusty tin can, holding a wretched, sodden, dead geranium. While these observations were being made, Tom was struggling with a refractory key in a broken lock, which finally yielded. The door flew open; he entered the new home, roaring in tremendous tones —

“I’ve reached the land of corn and wine,
And all its treasures freely mine,
O Beulah land, sweet Beulah land !”

Following him, we found it dark as pitch in “Beulah Land,” with an atmosphere strongly tainted by mice and mould, with a lingering dash of bacon. The soloist groped his way through darkness to the fireplace, touching with a match some kindlings and wood previously arranged therein. Then came a hopeful snapping and crackling of lively pine. The footlights flashed up, one bright little blaze followed another, until soon golden flames were dancing and leaping up the black throat of the wide old chimney. Oh, the glory and comfort of it! Surely nothing else in this world is quite so cheery and inspiring as an open wood fire. As its genial warmth began to pervade the room, now brightly illuminated from floor to ceiling, the discomforts of the day and the

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gloom of the night were soon forgotten. As the shadows lifted from our hearts, the pangs of hunger began to assert themselves, and the new house-keepers set to work.

On a previous visit Bert had made a lucky find of an old iron teakettle. This he now brought in, filled with fresh spring water, and placed it on a bed of glowing coals; then he went with Tom to feed and comfort the tired horses. Directly in front of the fire was the only vacant space in the room, the rest being filled with crated furniture and boxes. One of the latter was shoved into the open space and utilized for a table, a newspaper covering its surface instead of damask. A candle stuck in a vaseline bottle, placed upon a white napkin, served as a centerpiece. The contents of the lunch basket were transferred to the table, and the repast was ready, with the exception of the Java and Mocha combine, which was soon made, as the kettle was already singing merrily. We had hoped a cricket hidden away in the hearth might "join the kettle" in a duet of welcome; but if one was there, he remained obstinately mute. As only two chairs were obtainable, the male members of the party were seated at the banquet upon a pile of fir wood and bark. Never was a meal eaten with better relish. There was no time for after-dinner talk, as sleeping arrangements were to be made, bedding to be searched for and unpacked—a formidable task

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amid such chaos. Bert and Mary, groaning and perspiring, succeeded in putting up a bedstead in an adjoining room, surrounded by a confused mixture of things suggestive of the reserve stock of a department store. Scorning the luxury of a bedstead, we hastily tumbled springs, mattress, and bedding upon the floor, and were ready for the "sweet restorer."

But alas for human hopes! Just as our heads touched the pillows we were startled by the most terrific barking, shrieking, yelping, and howling that ever mortal heard.

"Tom, what under the sun is that?"

"A pack of hounds on the warpath, that's what."

On came the clamor, "nearer, clearer, deadlier than before," when suddenly the whole crew of bedlamites dashed under our house. Bert called out, "They've treed us the first dash, Tom!" There they were, snapping, snarling, gnashing their teeth, thumping and bumping against the very boards upon which we were lying.

"Up rose old Barbara Frietchie then." Armed with her threescore years and the iron poker, proceeding to the door, which she opened fully two inches, she said in calm but firm tones, "You dogs, go home, every last one of you! Go home, I say! Go!" Then a voice was heard from the department store, saying softly, "Yes, kind, good doggies, do go." And they did go, giving me the surprise of

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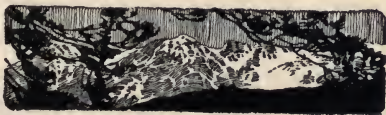
my life. The instant my brave words were heard, the racket ceased, and they came tumbling out from under the house, and went scampering off in the darkness as if fiends were at their heels. A human voice from a house long deserted must have shaken their nerves. Tom, however, saw things in a different light, for, as I closed the door with a triumphant bang, he remarked, "Rather a doubtful compliment to your charms!" There were no more disturbing sounds during the remainder of the night, and we slept until the morning was far advanced.

Breakfast hastily prepared and eaten, a little leisure and the light of day gave us an opportunity to inspect our new home. The room we were occupying had at least one favorable feature—it was very large. A high ceiling of wood was painted an ugly dull brown, the other woodwork in two shades of brown. The artist designing the wall paper must have been either color-blind or color-mad. Soiled and defaced, the paper was torn off in some places, in others it hung in long, fluttering, mildewed strips. There were four gloomy doors, and four high, narrow windows, criss-crossed by many panes—all dreary enough, surely. For consolation we looked to the wide old fireplace of stone, piled high with blazing logs, shining for us as shines a beacon light to the drowning mariner. The adjoining room was of comfortable dimensions—woodwork blue as the sky; walls embellished with trailing blue roses; three

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windows, five panes of glass missing, for which oil-cloth was substituted. At the two side windows hung remnants of Nottingham lace curtains, stained by rain and yellowed by time. As we touched them, fragments fell at our feet, like the decaying wedding finery of Miss Havisham. In a closet connected with the room we found a mouse-eaten volume of the "Lives of Eminent Women," and a stuffed China pheasant, with one eye gone, as well as the larger part of its feathers—a sorry-looking object.

The dining room was small and extremely dark, depressing wall paper and paint increasing the gloom. Beyond was a kitchen, big enough to furnish forth a feast for a company of dragoons. Extending the whole length of kitchen and dining room was a porch as wide as the platform of a railway station; while on the opposite side of the dining room was another, of less alarming proportions. The architectural marvel of the house was that the entrance to the second floor was from the outside instead of the inside.





III

LADIES and gentlemen," cried Tom, "we are now about to attempt the bold feat of reaching the second floor of the house of the Ranch of the Pointed Firs. Having myself once successfully made the ascent of the architectural Matterhorn leading to that region, I am prepared by that experience to act as your guide. First, allow me to inquire, are you all wearing shoes with hobnails and cleats? Very good. The ladies will need alpenstocks," handing us each a bedslat. His glance just then falling upon a coil of rope used during the process of moving, his face lighted with the sudden thought of further absurdity.

"That the exploit upon which we are embarking is a perilous one, I will not deny. To guard against accidents and possible loss of life, it is necessary that we should be firmly bound one to another with

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this rope. Reverend Chadband, allow me to begin with you," deftly twining the cord around the waist of Bert, whose clerical title had been suggested by his having recently donned a very old and dilapidated Prince Albert coat.

Our self-constituted guide, having gravely bound us together and tied the rope about his own person, looked us over with gratified pride.

"We are now, I think, in proper climbing trim. An X-ray worn as a miner's lamp would prove serviceable, but may be dispensed with. Forward, march!"

We filed out on a long narrow porch, the surface of which had a thick slippery coating, caused by continual rains. It was as slippery as if both greased and soaped. An iron rake leaning against the wall gave to our careful leader another inspiration. Passing it to Bert, he remarked, "If our esteemed brother will insert the iron teeth of this implement in the girdle of the rear lady, giving it a secure twist, it may be of invaluable service to us when the actual ascent begins." The "brother" complied with cheerful alacrity, especially as to the "secure twist."

At the end of the porch a door opened into a dark closet. Directly opposite was an extremely narrow stairway, almost as nearly perpendicular as a fire-escape, with sides roughly boarded up. It was as dark as Erebus, with not a ray of light except a

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faint glimmer from above. Looking up this black funnel, Tom's elaborate preparations seemed less preposterous. He now called out, "Brother Chadband, is the hoisting apparatus in position?"

"Ay, ay, sir," was the unclerical response.

"Very well; now, ladies, cling bravely to the rope. Plant your alpenstocks firmly with each advancing step. Be cool, be calm. Keep your eyes fixed upon the summit, and don't look back."

Strictly obeying instructions, we had scarcely got under way before our guide halted. "Perhaps, if the ladies feel up to it, a bit of yodeling might relieve the tedium of the ascent and add much to its realism."

As the ladies were now laughing hysterically, they were hardly "up to it." The ever-willing Chadband, however, was equal to the emergency. An oily voice was heard saying, "I myself, carnal vessel that I am, will essay a few joyful notes unto these hills." Whereupon arose a sound of lamentation not unlike the lonely howling of a distant wolf, broken at intervals by a shrill war whoop. By steady pulling from above and violent shoving from below, we were finally landed in a heap upon the floor, in the center of a big, garret-like room, dimly lighted by one small, dusty, cobwebby window. While being released from bondage, our guide remarked, as he glanced around, "We are now in the Cave of the Winds, a locality rarely visited by

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the ordinary tourist; those glittering stalactites above our heads are Nature's own formation." It was a true statement, the stalactites being long rows of yellow seed corn strung on wires. A couple of bottomless chairs, a few joints of rusty stovepipe, and an old scythe with a broken blade, hanging over one of the rafters, completed the attractions.

We were very eager for a glimpse of the adjoining apartment, as we had been told it was built and had been used exclusively as a ball room. Just think of it—we were about to visit our own private ball room! Do you wonder that our hearts swelled with pride as we entered that hall of many past festivities? It certainly was spacious—twenty feet wide and thirty long, with a truly beautiful smooth floor. It was rather cheerful, too, lighted by four windows. An immense alder stood so near the eastern windows that its leafless branches trailed across their panes. A rosebush had climbed half-way up its trunk and was swinging gracefully from its boughs, still fresh and green. From the west we looked straight into the encircling arms of a glorious big fir tree.

Between two of the windows was a slightly elevated platform, upon which stood a nail keg, which we inferred had been used as a seat for the long-ago musician, as an empty violin case still leaned pathetically against it. Here were also an iron bootjack and a perforated tin lantern, suggestive of tight wet boots and dark nights. The room was simply

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boarded up, with no ceiling, but merely rafters and shingles overhead. Starting from the musician's stand, were rough board seats extending around the room, supported by blocks of wood. Shallow boxes were nailed to the walls, each containing a small kerosene lamp. Near one of the windows hung a long narrow mirror, framed in cheap red, now badly scratched and marred. Lying beneath this was a set of quilting frames, which gave us the idea that a quilting party sometimes preceded the dance. In one corner of the room was a pile of abandoned rubbish—fragments of an old loom, and many broken and disabled farming implements. Tom, delving among these relics, suddenly shouted, "Hello! I've found the 'Entailed Hat.' It wasn't buried with that old duffer, after all." He certainly had unearthed the most antiquated specimen of head-gear ever seen outside the walls of a museum—a faded brown beaver, with wide brim and high bell-shaped crown, which he was jamming in here and bulging out there, with a view to restoring its original shape. "It's been a dandy in its day," he commented, as he smoothed its frowsy surface, "and it's not a bad tile yet. I don't know but I might wear it myself on Sundays, walking about in the holy calm, looking over my possessions. How do I look, Bert?" he asked, having donned it and pulled it well down over his ears.

"Well, if I must answer, I should say you look a

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composite of Guy Fawkes, Puritan father, and Buffalo Bill, with perhaps just a dash of Oregon farmer," replied the reverend joker.

While this by-play was going on, I had been trying to burnish the old mirror's cloudy surface, finding the bluish haze was there to stay. I thought of the antique mirror of which Hawthorne tells us, that hung in the old Province House—the one old Esther Dudley so often stood before, leaning upon her gold-headed staff, seeing pass across its blurred surface in shadowy procession the pomp and pageantry of the past. As the others came up, I said,

"We have a real treasure here!"

"It looks it," said one.

"I find it is an enchanted mirror; it possesses magical properties, and if one stood here at just the right hour she would see crossing its dim surface the shades of all the dead and gone revelers this old room has ever known."

"Do you reckon, if a fellow should come up here about the witching hour of twelve in the dark of the moon, with a rabbit's foot in each hand —"

"Hush, foolish scoffer! Even now they come —"

"Well, they're in a mighty big hurry. You tell 'em we ain't fixed up at all; that we are sleeping on the floor, and —"

"Behold, a great, swarthy, athletic young mountaineer, tall and straight as his native pines —"

"Gee whiz! Must be a hundred feet high!"

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"Don't interrupt, please; remember, there were giants in those days. They quickly pass. But what strange figures are these stealthily gliding through the gray shadows?"

"Injins, I'll bet you! Are they togged up in fringed buckskin and moccasins, with a lot of danglin' beads and feather fixin's?"

"Alas! Shocked by your skepticism, they recede. Ah! they are gone!"

"Good! Let the old spooks go! Say, let's try a waltz; this old floor is a daisy." And then, the spirit of folly being in full possession, if you could have looked through the windows of this old garret, you would have seen four elderly figures half veiled in dust gliding and whirling up and down the long room, while the rain rattled like hail upon the shingles. We thought we did it fairly well, with the exception, as Tom said, of "breathin' a little 'ard, like the young recruit at the 'angin' of Danny Deever."

"Now for a schottische!" he cried, as he began whistling "Pop Goes the Weasel."

"Oh, Tom, that's too awfully plebeian!"

"Plebeian? That's just where you're wrong. The 'shortish' was mighty popular in airly days."

The cuckoo below, just then chiming out the noon hour, nipped this discussion, and quickly restored our lost sanity.

"Twelve o'clock!" said Mary, excitedly. "Who

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could have thought we had idled away a whole hour in this idiotic fashion? I truly believe, if we had been caught at this nonsense, we would all have been clapped into straight jackets and carted off to the madhouse!"

Tom rushed across the room to the corner of odds and ends, and hung the old hat on the top of a hoe handle, hurriedly remarking, "Mr. Milburn, revered though invisible shade, I return your valuable inheritance, thanking you kindly for its loan. The inaugural ball is now over. Lights will be turned off at once. Follow me—fly!" And he dashed through the Cave of the Winds, and dropped into the hole in the floor, shouting back through the darkness, "Shoot the chute—everybody!"

Prosaic duties were awaiting us below. The men hurried off in search of fuel—just then one of our most crying needs. We busied ourselves with preparations for cooking our first dinner by a fireplace. Potatoes were buried in the ashes, and then covered with a nice warm blanket of coals. Onions were given the same treatment, after being partially peeled and wrapped in white tissue paper. Fiery coals were raked out to make a hot-box for the teakettle. A row of fine apples was placed on the hearth at proper distance from the heat. Then the perspiring cooks rushed to the door for air and to cool their blistered faces. We agreed that cooking by an open fire was interesting as a new experience,

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but that in time it might pall upon one. In a surprisingly short time, however, the apples turned a golden brown, plumped up and burst open, their escaping juices bubbling into white foam. "Done!" said the experts, as they were placed in a dish and given a liberal powdering of sugar. Then, with well bandaged hand, and face shielded by the dustpan, one of the brave pioneers volunteered to exhume the potatoes. They were found, like the apples, to be roasted to the queen's taste, were taken by the assistant *chef* and carefully folded in a napkin, while the red-eyed explorer probed the next mound. This proved to be less satisfactory; the onions were yielding but slowly to their doom. More coals were added. Thin slices of ham were laid across the bars of the wire toaster and broiled beautifully, coffee was made, and the dry goods box given a real table cloth in honor of the occasion. At each plate was a spray of buckthorn—a lovely, dark, waxen leaf, in color and shape like holly.

When the onions did give in, they did it handsomely. Upon removing their wrappers, we found a soft, pulpy mass, which, when seasoned and buttered, was delicious. The gentlemen pronounced the dinner good enough to satisfy the most epicurean taste. We bowed our burning heads in acknowledgment of the compliment. We couldn't blush; our crimson faces could take no deeper tint.

After three days of this underground cooking we

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struck. But one loaf of bread remained, and we were much too amateurish to attempt bread-baking over the coals or under them; so we said decisively, "Tomorrow morning that range goes up or we go out."





IV

IF you have tears, prepare to shed them now, as you listen to a tale of woe rising with the blue mists from the fir-clad hills of Oregon. You will remember that the burned and blistered cooks of the fireplace had rebelled; that the edict had gone forth that the kitchen range should go up at once, as but one loaf of bread remained in sight—and now, alas! even that had vanished. You will hardly believe that Pandora was hidden away within the interior of that innocent-looking range! The very instant violent hands were laid upon it, that malignant goddess raised the lid of her direful box, and such a swarm of undreamed-of troubles buzzed about us! In the first place, the stove had been left by the teamsters on the dining room porch instead of the kitchen porch. It was impossible now to carry it through the former room, which was packed solidly

From An Oregon Ranch

from floor to ceiling with boxes and crated goods. To take it around the house, on a muddy, slippery hillside, looked an impossibility.

To add to the general wretchedness of things, the weather had changed in the night; the rain had turned to sleet, and now snow was falling, freezing as it fell. After much scheming the ponderous stove was finally zigzagged off the porch and placed upon wooden rollers, immediately sinking fathoms deep in mud. In spite of all lifting, pushing, and prying, it sat there as firmly fixed as the Rock of Gibraltar. A new propeller was devised; then, after wobbling a little, it lurched forward a foot or two. Thinking to give a light touch to the scene, I cried joyously —

“She starts, she moves, she seems to feel
The thrill of life along her keel !”

Then two pairs of eyes were lifted, from which flashed murder in the first degree. It seems that poetry doesn't always find favor with the sterner sex. By pluck and perseverance the monster was finally located where it should have been placed when taken from the wagon. The range was wide, the door narrow. That the one would never go through the other, Mary and I both saw at a glance—a knowledge gained by the men only after making careful measurements. The door was taken off its hinges. More measurements, but still no go; now

From An Oregon Ranch

the door frame itself must be taken out—and all the time the weather was growing colder, the sleet thicker.

“Got to tear the whole end of the house out,” growled Tom, “to get this blasted old man-of-war in here; I always said that it was a fool notion to bring it!” Of course he was the one who insisted upon bringing it; but I have learned there is a time to keep silence. Can you believe that even after the taking out of the door frame that stubborn thing wouldn’t go in? The only hope left was in the removing of a projecting plate, strongly riveted with bolts—a task for John L. Sullivan. But Tom was mad now; “his strength was as the strength of ten.” With chisel and monkey wrench he bore down upon the offending obstacle and literally tore it out by the roots. Lidless, doorless, and backless, like a shorn Samson, the stove then went quietly enough to its fate. After the pipe was jointed and poked out through a hole in the roof (there being no chimney), it became apparent that some one must climb up there and wire it in position—a dangerous undertaking, the roofs of Oregon houses being as steep as toboggan slides, and this one just now glazed with sleet. Bert believed he could do the trick by nailing wooden cleats for each advancing step. There being no ladder on the premises, a table, surmounted by a barrel, was placed at the edge of the porch. The daring adventurer, armed with hatchet, nails, and a

From An Oregon Ranch

coil of wire, mounted this pedestal, observing that he felt quite like a performing elephant. After violent struggling and some vigorous boosting, he was safely landed on the porch roof. Crossing it gingerly, he called down, "Now send up your lumber," which went up with the caution, "Nail 'em on firm, old chap; you're in ticklish business."

It certainly was "ticklish." That almost perpendicular roof, covered with sleet, shone like a glacier. We begged him to give it up and come down; but he was too plucky for that, as was testified by the grim declaration, "We build the ladder by which we rise," as with much hammering of nails and crackling of ice he slowly toiled to the summit. At the extreme end of the building stood what we called the "Leaning Tower of Pisa." How he was to cross that long stretch of roof, we couldn't see. This problem he immediately solved by sitting astride the comb of the roof and jumping himself along, in a series of kangaroo leaps—a moving spectacle, as seen upon the sharp ridge of a snowy cliff: that dark, distorted figure, half crawling, half leaping, followed by the funereal folds of a trailing Prince Albert coat.

Tom, unable to restrain his delight, called out, with true showman eloquence, "The greatest free open-air entertainment ever seen upon the Pacific Slope! Professor Clutch-'em-Tight, the world-renowned bareback rider, crossing the Alps upon his

From An Oregon Ranch

famous Iceland steed, 'Razor-back,' which never until this hour felt the restraining hand of man. Fifty cents and a quarter of a dollar admits you to the big tent. Hurry up, everybody!"

The "Professor," ignoring this harangue, galloped solemnly on to his goal. The "tower" being then some feet below him, a few descending steps were made. Standing upon this icy slope, the wiring was done, much to the satisfaction of his ground floor assistant, who, feeling that the worst of the work was about over, and himself safe on *terra firma*, was now in buoyant spirits, singing in tones loud enough to have been heard on the top of Mount Hood—

"High in the belfry the old sexton stands,
Grasping a wire in his thin bony hands."

"The troubadour is most flattering, especially as to thin, bony hands; but I would suggest that he leave off that bellowing and go inside and start up his old furnace."

"'I do make all convenient haste, my lord,'" he called, as he came bustling into the kitchen. "That old Santa Claus on the roof, in the heel-cracker coat, is advising me to fire up," he said to us, cramming in fuel and striking matches. "I'll have this thing going like a house afire in about a minute. You can start your biscuit now; and, say, open a can of maple syrup, and we'll have a high jinks of a time."

From An Oregon Ranch

And we had it too; for no sooner was the fire started than smoke began pouring out from every crack and crevice of that stove, even from the front draught. It filled the house and rolled in billowy masses from open doors and broken windows. We were sure that nothing like it had been seen since the burning of Chicago. The operator, dumb with amazement, was dimly seen through the haze prancing round and round the stove like a whirling dervish, opening and closing draughts, slamming doors and lids, jamming in more fuel and striking more matches, but all to no purpose. Each and every effort ended in smoke. Bert, having returned to earth, stood gasping in the door.

"I thought you hadn't fired her; no smoke at all above."

"You didn't expect this blamed old sarcophagus to smoke at both ends, did you?" And then the flood gates of wrath opened. His listeners will never again doubt the existence of the emotional Mr. Bowser. There was absolutely no draught. It was found that the projecting pipe aloft was not of sufficient height; for it must be substituted one of those tall smokestacks, and there was no hope of fire until this could be done. This discovery would not have meant much in the old home, where the desired stack could have been ordered from a hardware store and put in place within the hour; but here it meant a drive of forty miles to and from the little town we had left,

From An Oregon Ranch

at a season of the year when roads were at their worst.

It was decided that the trip should be made the following day, there being no advantage in postponement, with ravenous appetites calling for bread where no bread could be had. We were told that the coming trip was the only one that would be made until the next spring, and were advised to keep that fact before us in the making up of our memoranda—a mighty task for women accustomed to the ordering of daily supplies, with the telephone at hand to rectify errors or omissions. Our entire evening was devoted to this work, and I am proud to say that only one item was forgotten, but that the important one of *eggs*—an omission which was rued in sack-cloth and ashes for weeks to come. When the four long lists were finished and folded, the “alarm” was wound and set at four o’clock, whereupon a universal groan was heard. Instantly our spirits fell to zero, and there remained.

Promptly at the time appointed, that clock opened up for business. I think it must have awakened every sleeper between the two oceans. We had never known it to work so vigorously. Whether Tom had, in winding it, given an extra turn or two, or something vital had given way inside, will probably never be known. While the horses were being fed and harnessed by the fitful light of a lantern, our third breadless meal was prepared. We had crackers,

From An Oregon Ranch

fortunately, and "before-daylight" appetites are easily satisfied.

Our wretched pilgrims had been long on their way ere the dawn climbed over our green hills. The day was very dark and cloudy. Early in the afternoon rain began falling. By six o'clock darkness fell like a pall upon us — no moon, no stars, no ray of light. Even then we began listening for the sound of wheels, though we had been told not to expect the wanderers before eight o'clock. We put lamps in the windows, drew up the blinds, piled high with logs the old fireplace, hoping the illumination might make a little path of radiance through the forest's gloom. For us this was an uncanny experience. Outside, no "social watchfires" gleamed from neighborly windows; in fact, there were no windows — only the blackness of night. Within the old house were two lone, listening women. From the "ball room" above came a flying touch of phantom feet and a faint swish of ghostly skirts, as plainly heard as the scurrying of mice among the packing boxes. High up among the pines a lonely night bird screamed; while upon the window sills fell the steady drip, drip, drip of the rain, as if some wandering spirit of the night were rapping out for us a message.

Not until ten o'clock did we hear the welcome rumble of wheels over the little bridge at the foot of the hill. Then came a loud "Whoo-whoo," a sort of mountain call we have learned here. How quickly

From An Oregon Ranch

we flew to the door and gave an answering call, all our fears forgotten! As that wagon-load of merchandise had to be carried in, it was midnight before we sat at supper, listening to a detailed account of the vexations and mishaps of the day. About dusk the travelers had found themselves "stuck fast in the mud," working vainly a whole hour with rails and poles to lift those wheels out of a bog. Fortunately a Good Samaritan came along with a team of big Clydesdale horses, which he hitched to the wagon, yanking it out in a jiffy. Tom said he could have fallen upon the big necks of the horses and blubbered for joy. Just then night swooped down; and from that time until they reached home, one had to walk in advance with the lantern.

Thus endeth the story of the putting up of a kitchen range in the Ranch of the Pointed Firs.

P. S. Among the merchandise were found five kinds of bread.





V

I HAVE been thinking, dear Nell, that my letters have shown you only the somber side of our ranch life. When you think of us in our new Oregon home, you probably imagine a dreary, grim old house, perched high on a hillside; only that, and nothing more. You know nothing of the beauty of our surroundings, nothing of the semicircle of towering hills clad from base to summit with the living green of fir trees, seen from our front windows and separated from us by only a very narrow glen—the latter as green and fresh in January as are our lawns at home in May. Curving and winding through this little valley, with a tracery of green trees and leafless ones, is the loveliest mountain stream that ever the sun shone on—in summertime a dreamily murmuring rivulet; in winter a rushing, roaring torrent. Then it comes rollicking and roy-

From An Oregon Ranch

stering through our little glen, like some mad bacchanalian half crazed by mountain vintage, plunging over rocky terraces, leaping mossy logs, whisking around curves, surging and eddying against ferny banks, clutching in its white arms dead limbs and branches, held one instant, hurled broadcast the next, as vaulting over them with a tossing of green billows and flying spray it reels stormily on, bent upon still madder pranks.

You may be inclined to call this ranting, and perhaps think it inspired by this same mountain vintage; but you have never seen the mountain streams of Oregon. Ours seemed so wild and elfish that we immediately christened it "Deer Leap." When we came here, a high, strong bridge spanned it. In one of these recent night carousals that bridge was lifted bodily and borne away, and no plank of it was ever seen again. One day last winter, after heavy rains, Deer Leap was tearing and plunging down from the hills, floating a mighty drift of logs, stumps, boards, and such *débris*, when, seeing Mary and me watching from the bank, in sudden fury he hurled the whole mass at us, and there it remains to this day a monument to his madcap play.

In summertime, when canopied by green leaves and swinging vines, with birds singing glad hallelujahs above it, and the elusive speckled trout darting through it, then indeed is our brook a thing of beauty and a joy forever. However, it is but one of

From An Oregon Ranch

the many charms of this old place. We have lovely springs of pure soft water. One of these, high upon the hill back of the house, gushing from a rocky ledge beneath a clump of pines, comes tumbling down in a mossy fern-shaded rill, to slip beneath the shadows of a near-by alder and creep into an ugly wooden spout, and thence be carried to a still uglier wooden trough stationed at the end of the kitchen porch.

Upon our arrival here, a well-mannered stream of water about two inches in diameter was flowing from this spout; but one morning after the rains I heard Tom exclaim, as he stepped out on the porch, "Great Scott! isn't this getting a little bit too gay?" I looked out, and, lo! a stream of water as thick as the stove pipe was gushing from that spout and dashing half-way across the porch. Tom had to construct a sort of breakwater of boards in front of it, in doing which he was half drowned, shouting at me through the roar of the breakers, "Life may seem extinct, but don't give up till you've rolled me over a barrel!" Not being familiar with the habits of mountain springs, this "rampage" surprised us; but we afterward learned that they are as much given to "ram-pagin'" as was Mrs. Joe Gargery herself.

Lower down the hill, at one side of the front lawn, under a giant alder, another spring pours from the cavern-like side of a big rock, and goes dancing away over a stony path to lose itself in the green

From An Oregon Ranch

pasture lands below. Upon the massive rock overhanging this spring we might have carved —

“The mountain air
In winter is not clearer, nor the dew
That shines on mountain blossoms.”

The water of this spring is most delicious, icy-cold and pure; “the more you drink, the more you want.” Here, too, are growing wonderful ferns — long feathery fronds, just such as we buy of the florists at home, who call them “Boston ferns.” Here they are found growing wild, three or four feet high — a reckless profusion of them in all moist shady places. Think of this, and groan, the next time you pay a dollar for a little stingy one six inches high! The moss about this spring is exquisite, as if woven by fairy fingers, of tiny velvety ferns. In fact, the Oregon moss is wonderful; it covers trees, stumps, rocks, fences, and even the roofs of houses. Tom says the moss business is overdone here; but I like it.

At one side of the lawn is a large orchard, bearing fine apples, pears, peaches, plums, prunes, and cherries; and winding through this bower of lusciousness is a little path leading to the garden — a pretty place, all embowered by trees, giving it that touch of seclusion so dear to the heart of the gardener. Just above the garden is another spring, hidden away in a tangle of greenery. Back of the house is a pre-

From An Oregon Ranch

cupitous hill, crowned with fir, laurel, and young oak trees, the latter draped with pendent fringes of silvery moss, in fine contrast with the green of the firs; while straggling down toward the house are trees of various kinds, clumps of bushes, and tall brown ferns, with a perfect network of dewberry vines covering the ground and forming a snare for the foot of the unwary. Here, too, is fine old oak with mistletoe growing in its branches. Oh, the joy of having that lovely mistletoe growing right in one's own dooryard!

“The mistletoe hung in the castle hall,
The holly branch shone on the old oak wall!”

We shall use buckthorn for holly, and when the blessed Yuletide comes round, this old *rancho* shall blossom as the rose.

Across the rear of the yard, half-way up the hillside, are the remains of an old fence, which we shall remove, except one portion of it, which is formed by a fallen log. This must have been one of the monarchs of the forest. It is seventy-five feet long, and so thick that when Tom stands on one side of it and I on the other, we are not visible to each other. In winter it is a mossy, lifeless thing; but in summer vines clamber over it, running along the top and festooning its sides; chattering squirrels play over it, and tuneful birds meet there for choir rehearsals.

From An Oregon Ranch

Our woodland is truly a "forest primeval," as wild as an African jungle. From a hilltop beyond Deer Leap, when the skies are clear, we can plainly see Mount Jefferson, Mount Hood, and the Three Sisters, yes, and Mary's Peak. Why it is called that I don't know, when it has its pretty Indian name, "Chintimini."

I have now indifferently sketched for you, dear Nell, a few of the more pronounced attractions of this old place; but, believe me, it has hundreds of minor though no less witching ones. Nature in making this mountain region dealt out grandeur and beauty with a lavish hand. I cannot say as much for man's work, for surely here are the ugliest buildings that ever blotted and disfigured a landscape. Rickety, weather-beaten, and boarded up and down, they are so irredeemably ugly that one longs to sweep them off the face of the earth. There are two buildings, however, made of logs, that I would spare, as they seem to fit in with their rugged surroundings. One is a big, wide, roomy barn; the other a "root house." I had never seen or heard of such a thing before, and inquiring of the lord of the manor what it was for, I was told that "it was a place to root in when you feel like it"—an evasive reply which proved to me that he knew no more about it than I did. This building, hidden by climbing vines and green moss, is picturesque as an old ruin; only it is no ruin—it is good for a century yet.

From An Oregon Ranch

The fences on the place are of rails, which would be all right and appropriate if only they were good rails; but, alas! the storms and stress of the seasons have borne so heavily upon them that they have mostly given up trying to be fences, and have lain down in discouraged and straggling heaps along the boundary lines. We are told that this ranch was well kept up by its former owners when they were living here, but since then has been sadly misused and abused by tenants. It now, I fancy, resembles the "abandoned farms" of the East. At first these unsightly things worried us; but soon there came to us a reproving voice from the everlasting hills, saying, "Oh, you poor anxious atoms away down there in the glen, fretting your small souls because of an inartistic cowshed, forgetting God's beauty all around and above you. Are you not ashamed?" We were ashamed, and these things at least are no longer "a speck in our sunshine."

Many of our eastern friends have written us that the Oregon rains must be terrible, the many gray days pressing heavily upon us poor mortals cooped up in our little mountain home. But this sympathy is not altogether called for. In the first place, the rains here don't come with a wind that wraps your skirts about you like a winding sheet and turns your umbrella inside out. They fall straight down from the heavens, in a decent, unhurrying way. Having six months to do it in, there is no occasion for haste

From An Oregon Ranch

or bluster. As to wet days being depressing here, they are not half so much so as in a city where one sees only wet muddy pavements and a black sea of bobbing umbrellas. Now, as this happens to be a rainy day, let me describe it to you. In the old stone fireplace pitchy pine knots are blazing like campaign torches, filling the big room with a ruddy glow. Outside are gray skies, falling rain, and sodden earth; but from a window here by my desk, I see the wet leaves of the orchard trees ablaze with color, and through this vista, just below, an old fence overgrown with blackberry and wild rose bushes; beyond it, a narrow strip of gray stubble land, splotched with the brown of dead ferns and weeds; skirting its farthest side is the fringing foliage of the brook, a mass of tender green, yellow, and russet; and back of all this, the mighty hills, an unbroken wall of dark green, splashed with the scarlet and gold of autumn, and just now enmeshed in purple mists.

While writing the last sentence or two, Nature's scene shifter must have been busy; for now, as I look, a thin gauzy veil of mist stretches straight across these heights. Through this shadowy screen the hills seem remote, the trees vague and spectral; the vivid hues of autumn have faded to the late after-glow of a summer sunset. These hills are my joy and my despair. I could cry with vexation when I try to picture them to others. Such fleeting and changeful beauty should be sketched only by the

From An Oregon Ranch

hand of a master. I knew this all the time, but fools, you know, rush in where angels fear to tread, and I did so want to show you something of this outdoor beauty, that you might at least partially understand why we are not depressed in gloomy weather.

As to being "cooped up" in this little mountain place, I should think we were rather less cramped for room than those friends who write us from city houses and "flats." We have our own broad domains, besides free range of the whole of the Coast Mountains, for here are no "no trespassing" signs for the unarmed intruder. Here, too, we are free from "the tyranny of clothes." If one feels a sudden longing for a walk in the fresh air, no careful street toilet need be made in fear of critical eyes, as in a city, where, Thoreau says, "the houses are so arranged, in lanes and fronting one another, that every traveler has to run the gantlet, and every man, woman, and child gets a lick at him." Here, with rubber overshoes added to the indoor toilet and a shawl thrown over the head, one is equipped for the woods and fields, no eye beholding save those of the beasts of the fields and the fowls of the air; and their eyes are kind, not critical. One year of this free life in the Oregon hills, untrammelled by conventionalities, is better than "fifty years of Europe," and when I leave these glorious solitudes it will be to enter "that low green tent whose curtain never outward swings."



VI

IN my last letter, Nell, I tried to picture to you some of the beauties surrounding our new Oregon home; but I do assure you that it was only the preface to this wonderful Nature-book of the hills. I would like to tell you more of them; but as man cannot live by scenery alone, and as you particularly want details of our early experiences here, not only the lights but the shadows, I shall have to go back again to those memorable days of January when we first came here. Green fir seen upon the hills is admirable; but green fir in the kitchen range is abominable, especially after being soaked by rain for three months. When first put into the stove, bolstered up with plenty of pine kindlings, it would blaze rather hopefully, until the moss had burned off and the kindlings had vanished, when with sighing and sobbing it would shed a few rainy tears, turn black, and

From An Oregon Ranch

all would be over. The most of our packing boxes were demolished in efforts to set the fir wood on fire, but all in vain; it simply would not burn, and we had to go back to cooking by the fireplace. There we did fairly well, with a liberal supply of bark, the latter burning well here, but of no use in the range. While in this slough of despond, a man came one day to hang wall paper for us. Hearing our lamentations, he suggested drying the wood in the oven before using it. Long may that man live and prosper! The curing process helped wonderfully—only now the wood was too combustible; it burned out in a jiffy. We would fill the stove full, leave it fifteen minutes, come back to it, and not a vestige of fire would be left. We soon learned that the stove must never be left alone; one must stand there, with hand on the throttle, like the engineer of a locomotive.

The demand for fuel was always greater than the supply, though the oven was kept filled with it from January to May, except on baking days. Sometimes we would close the oven door, forgetting it until reminded by a great crackling, when, flinging the door open, flames would rush out in our faces, and every stick of the fuel would be found ablaze. I wonder we didn't blow the stove up and burn the house down! Though we didn't know enough to bake our wood without being told, we found out one thing for ourselves, and that was that when the wood was heated a pitch oozed from it that stuck to the fingers

From An Oregon Ranch

and burned like hot sealing wax. Even after learning this fact, we kept forgetting it, and hurriedly reaching into the oven to seize a stick, we would shriek and dance around like Sioux Indians. All winter long our hands were blistered and seared. Once on the hand, the stuff stuck like a fiery adhesive plaster, and not all the waters of "great Neptune's ocean" could wash it off.

Again our man of experience came to the rescue, telling us first to soak our hands in kerosene and then wash them—a helpful though not fragrant remedy. We learned other things from our new guide, philosopher, and friend: first, that the wood we were using was "dozy" (we had ourselves observed that it was somnolently inclined); secondly, that if our "men folks" would cut or saw down a big tree, we would find that the heart of it would make a roaring fire. Now, we had suspicions that neither of our "men folks" had ever felled a tree, which suspicions were strengthened by their great activity in collecting bark, fallen limbs, and other woodland *débris*, and palming it off on us as something rather choice; but Mary and I, pining for the heart of that big tree, harped so long about it that at last the fagot gatherers were spurred to action. At least we judged something was about to happen from a conversation in the woodhouse, overheard by us, which ran somewhat as follows:

"Ever file one?"

From An Oregon Ranch

"No; did you?"

"No. What the dickens shall we do?"

"Do? We'll just file her, that's what."

Whereupon began terrible rasping, grating, screeching noises, which continued until the perpetrators were summoned to dinner. During the meal we were told they had been filing a saw. Though painfully aware of the fact, Mary innocently exclaimed,

"Filing a saw! I didn't suppose either of you knew how."

"Know how to file a saw!" exclaimed Bert. "Why, I've filed 'em, I may say, from infancy up."

"Yes," chimed in his shameless associate, "and if I had a dollar for every one I've filed, I'd ask nothing of J. Pierpont Morgan." Scornful silence on the part of their auditors.

Soon after dinner there came a rapping at the kitchen door, and there we found the unblushing prevaricators, on their shoulders a saw about four yards long, one carrying an axe, the other an old tin pail half full of iron wedges.

"Whither away?" was asked.

"We are going, ladies, to hold 'communion with Nature in her visible forms.'"

"Oh!"

"Yes, ma'am, we are going to draw near to Nature's heart, as it were, and rive out a chunk of it to satisfy your insatiate cravings."

From An Oregon Ranch

We were then told that if we would glance up Mount Nebo about twilight we would behold a novel and interesting scene.

“Suppose neither of you ever happened to see a tree snaked out of the woods, did you?”

“I’ve seen ’em from infancy up!”

“Yes, and if I had a dollar for—” But our hearers had gone to rejoin the horses, which stood near, literally wreathed in log chains.

The cavalcade had not long been gone, before the rain poured down as if the bottom had dropped out of the water tanks above. We pitied our men folks then, and their poor horses too, through that long afternoon. Sure enough, about dark, “silently down from the mountain’s crown a great procession swept,” but, look as we might, we could see nothing being “snaked.”

Passing the house, those misguided men looked so miserably wet and bedraggled that we considerably refrained from commenting on “the novel and interesting scene.”

After supper, when the inner man had been refreshed and the outer one was basking in the genial heat of an open fire, the story all came out. It seems they had found a fine tree six feet through, and thinking they might as well “git a-plenty while they were gittin’,” they had tackled it. “Good! Saw it down, saw it down!” But they never got half-way through the bark, because, as Bert explained, “Every

From An Oregon Ranch

time I pulled on the saw Tom pulled against me."

"Yes," retorted Tom, "and what did you do when I pulled?"

"Well, old man, I said to myself, 'You don't get the better of me,' so I just braced my feet and pulled too."

"If you two men oughtn't to be in an asylum for the feeble-minded! The idea of standing in a drenching rain this whole afternoon, trying to pull a saw away from each other!"

"But, Mary, we didn't pull the saw all the afternoon; when we found we had struck a *lignum vitae* instead of a fir tree, we gave it up. But we've got you some dandy wood; we will bring it down in the morning."

"Snake it down?"

"I hardly know—what do you think, Bert?"

"Better not," said that gentleman, frowning thoughtfully. "Your team is a little bit too light."

The next morning I saw them unloading their precious fuel—a preponderance of bark, and a few small mossy poles, about such as one uses to support aspiring lima beans. I called Mary to come and see the "dandy wood."

"It's just what I expected!" she cried indignantly. "Snake it down! I guess not, unless they had poked those little sticks through the links of the chain."

"But, Mary, they could have bunched them like cheese straws, you know."

From An Oregon Ranch

Then we got to laughing, and fancying all sorts of nonsensical things.

“Wouldn’t these mossy little twigs be lovely standing about the room in vases, burning like those Chinese incense tapers?”

“Yes; or, cut in short lengths and tied with baby ribbon, they would make stunning favors for a green luncheon.”

“And nothing could be better if we were going to banquet the Modern Woodmen.”

In the fun of conjuring up ludicrous uses for our new wood, we quite forgot that it was not the most desirable for fuel. There is nothing like a good laugh to float one over difficult places.

Well, we never got our big tree until summer. Then the men were told by a wise Nestor of the hills that by boring holes in these large trees and firing them from the inside, they could soon *burn* them down. They eagerly pounced upon that idea, and since then we have had excellent wood.

Our souls were tried not only by fire, but by flour. Not that the flour was poor, for we ate good bread made of the same kind in the little town where we stopped when we first arrived. But the women there assured us that we would have much trouble with it until we learned how to handle it; and they were right. This flour was made from what is here called “soft wheat.” Put it on the kneading board, and it would spread over it like batter on a griddle and stick

From An Oregon Ranch

there like glue. Try to remedy this by adding flour to make a stiffer dough, and it would crack open while baking and come out of the oven as hard as a baseball. As to cutting it, you could as easily slice a slab of wood. No, it must be mixed soft, and must not lie motionless an instant on the board, or it had to be scraped up with a knife. We remembered hearing that Boston bakers pound the board with the dough, instead of kneading it, and this method we adopted, though it required the alertness and dexterity of an East India juggler. We would clutch the mass, raise it high toward heaven with one hand, with the other dash flour on the board, then bring down the dough, swift as lightning snatch it up again, dash on more flour, whack it down again, and so continue to the bitter end. I tell you, Nell, when bread was mixed in the Ranch of the Pointed Firs the china rattled and the earth trembled.

Mixing was not the only trouble; the bread wouldn't rise after it was mixed, though swathed and swaddled in wrappings until it assumed such proportions that we had to call upon the men to carry it to the fireplace, where it much resembled an enormous hassock cosily placed in expectation of a call from some Brobdingnagian of the hills. When the time came to make it into loaves, one would naturally expect to find some slight recognition of these warm attentions; but no — there it was, as inert and unresponsive as a mixture of Portland cement or

From An Oregon Ranch

putty; and when baked it had a crust as thick as fir bark and as hard.

One day while moulding it into loaves, I thought, "I'll just use some of this for biscuit, and give this family a surprise;" and I did. First, the loaves were baked, and put out on the table, where they looked as if they had just been exhumed from the ovens of Pompeii. Then, with beating heart, I placed my great venture in the oven. After twenty minutes of thrilling suspense the door was cautiously opened. The loaves seemed dried instead of baked, and were about half their original size. Just as I was debating in my mind whether it would not be nobler to burn them and thus end all, the men came in and Tom's eye was arrested by my layout. "Hello! Look at Katharine's geological exhibit—four big round boulders. And what might these little jokers be? Geodes? No, they can't be geodes; not the right color. What would you call them, Bert?"

Scrutinizing them carefully, Bert thought they "might be a sort of ammunition."

"Not shells," said Tom, hitting them a resounding whack with a carving knife; "they're too solid, and there is no fuse to 'em. Might be paper weights."

Wiping tears from my eyes with my pitchy fingers, hermetically sealing one, I looked up with the other and said,

"'You are pleased to be merry, gentlemen.'"

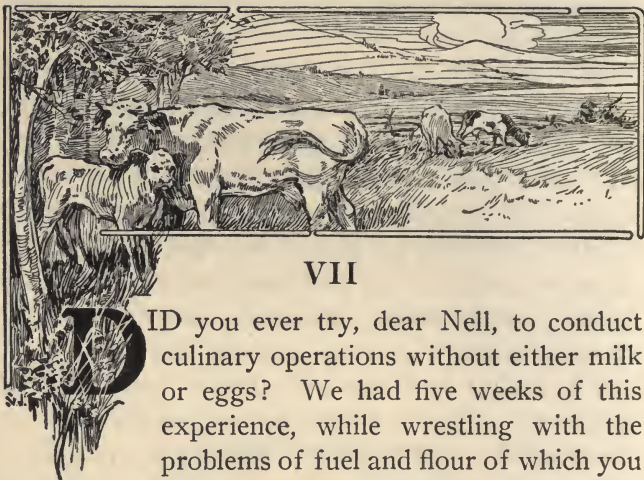
"Come, Bert, we've got to fly. When Katharine

From An Oregon Ranch

begins to talk like Shakespeare, she's mad; but I'll just take one of these things out to the wood-house and bust it open and see if I can find out what it's made of."

We wrestled with this flour for six long months. While the bread improved some, it was never good. One day the groceryman gave Tom a different kind of flour, saying he had ordered it specially for "new-comers," as they all complained of the other. When I learned that this too was Oregon flour, I had small hope of it; but, to my surprise, it made light, soft, tender bread, which was eaten with praise and thanksgiving.





VII

DID you ever try, dear Nell, to conduct culinary operations without either milk or eggs? We had five weeks of this experience, while wrestling with the problems of fuel and flour of which you have been told. Our nearest neighbors lived a mile away, and, besides, they had no milk to spare; consequently "after-dinner" coffee was in vogue here at every meal. The hill hens had suspended business for the winter, and, having forgotten to order eggs when that last trip to market was made, we had now to suffer the penalty. Having neither milk nor eggs, our cuisine showed a painful dearth of such delicacies as custards, omelets, puddings, etc. This we could have borne without complaint; but as nearly all vegetables, to be palatable, require either milk or cream, the lack of these articles was a real hardship. Then, too, being so far from the markets, we could

From An Oregon Ranch

get no fresh meats. We had smoked ham and breakfast bacon — only these and nothing more. The first, unaccompanied by eggs, we soon tired of, especially as it happened to be salt as brine, tough, and hard; the bacon was good enough, but I defy any one to face it three times a day for five weeks and not loathe it. But few vegetables were brought out to the ranch, the wagons being so heavily loaded with other things. We supposed they could be bought in the neighborhood; but here again we were disappointed.

The farmers had disposed of their surplus stock earlier in the season, reserving only sufficient for their own use; and it was not long until our supply was reduced to apples and potatoes. I see that I have made a vegetable of the apple, but that's no worse than calling potatoes "spuds," as people do here. You may be sure that members of this family suffered nothing from apprehensions of gout. How often, when looking through our empty cupboard, did we think sorrowfully and sympathetically of Dame Hubbard's dog!

At breakfast, while munching adamantine bread, bacon, and "spuds," we were apt to have tormenting visions of hot griddle cakes and maple syrup, or of juicy porterhouse steaks, and eggs variously served. At dinner, with the breakfast menu repeated, some one was sure to ask, "How would you like a good big slice of rare roast beef, with nicely browned sweet potatoes?" "Yes, or scalloped oysters, or

From An Oregon Ranch

chicken pie, and a nice, crisp, cool salad?" — and so on down through an imaginary bill of fare.

Lest you wonder why we didn't "go to town" and renew our supplies, let me remind you of the impassable condition of the roads. For weeks during the late winter never a team was seen passing. Finally, when almost the "last herring smoked upon the coals," two hungry men arose in desperation, declaring they would at least find some cows and chickens. In the chill dawn of the following morning, in a pouring rain, they started on their mission. They were gone until five o'clock in the evening; then the now familiar mountain cry, "Whoo-whoo," came echoing through the woods. As I opened the door, Tom shouted, "Katharine, run out in the road and head off these cows!"

I knew by the tone and the voice that this was a "hurry-up" call; so, throwing the omnipresent shawl over my head, I dashed out of the house, and, as self-preservation is the first law of life, snatched up a pole that was propping up the limb of a peach tree, then flew down the path and out of the gate into the middle of the road, and, standing there in mud and rain, looked the field over. Away down the hill, in the road, stood the horses and wagon; in the latter I discerned several chicken coops, from which protruded long feathered necks, with red-combed squawking heads. The pasture bars were down, and standing near them was Tom. A little higher up the

From An Oregon Ranch

hill a road branches off, and there Bert was stationed. Coming full-tilt toward me were three big, wild-eyed galloping cows, with two very young-looking, spindle-shanked calves. I admit I was scared; but remembering my great-grandsires who fought in the Revolution, I raised the pole high in air, like a flagstaff, and stood firm. On came the bovine brigade until within a few rods of me, when suddenly they halted, tossed up their heads, and stared at me. I hardly believe they thought I was alive; perhaps they mistook me for the statue of "Liberty enlightening the World." We stood there looking at each other, until Tom yelled, "Well, why don't you do something? We haven't had a bite to eat since breakfast." Now, I knew no more than the man in the moon what to do; but just then one of the cows, one with awful threatening horns, began pawing up the mud, so I called back, "I think this big spotted one is cross!" "Cross nothing! She's gentle as a lamb," Tom answered. She's an old cow, I thought, the mother of the other two. Then she must be the grandmother of these calves, and it would be rather disrespectful to pounce upon the old lady with this pole. So I just continued to "hold her with my glittering eye." Again Tom roared, "She won't hurt you, I tell you; she's just scared and rattled!"

It did not seem to me that the grandmother was scared. She had now advanced several paces, and was not only throwing mud, but had lowered her

From An Oregon Ranch

head and was shaking her horns at me in a way quite disconcerting. That she was "rattled" seemed plausible; certainly her manners were not reposeful. Thinking I must do something, I pounded the road a little with my pole, throwing some mud myself. At this the enemy moved forward in solid phalanx, the younger cows now shaking their horns also; whereupon, forgetting my valorous ancestors of the Revolution, I drew a trifle nearer the rail fence, and, again raising my standard high in air, said in a hoarse, loud voice, "Huey, cows! Huey there!"

No effect whatever, except upon the man down the road. "Goin' to stand all night lookin' at 'em?" he yelled. "Why don't you close in on 'em?"

"Close in on 'em, indeed! That's all very well, sir, from your point of view, at the tail end of this caravan," I thought; "but up here the outlook is different, facing these three steaming monsters, with six threatening horns and twice as many eager hoofs;" and I remarked softly to myself, "I won't do it."

On the grassy embankment at the roadside, quite near me, stood one of those grotesque Noah's-ark calves. "I'll just close in on you, my young friend: you will likely turn and run back down the road, where I trust your perspiring relatives may follow you. I knew better than to jump at the creature with my big pole; so, trailing it behind me, I advanced cautiously, with one hand extended, saying in sweet

From An Oregon Ranch

tones, "Pretty little calvie" — a piece of the basest flattery when applied to the sorry-looking object before me. One step more forward — and what did that ungentle idiot do but give a wild snort, leap like a deer, whirl square about, and plunge through the rail fence — not through, either, for it stuck fast between the rails, bawling at the top of its voice. Mercy, Nell, you ought to have seen grandma then! She ploughed across that muddy road, scrambled up the green bank, and, standing before the prisoner at the bar, literally tore up the sod. Both daughters charged after her, all bellowing, all pawing sod; and even the other calf, that wasn't in the affair at all, added his wailings, while away down the road the scared chickens squawked louder than ever.

Seeing the ruin I had wrought, I climbed to the top of the fence, ready to drop on the other side if future developments should make it necessary. Up the road came both men running, and I thought, "Now, Katharine, you'll catch it!" But, to my great surprise, not one solitary word did they utter, not even to each other. Half starved, soaked through and through with misery, they seemed dumbly desperate. Rain trickled in streams from their rubber coats and hats; their boots were muddy to the tops, mud was on their faces and in their hair, as, silent and grim, with stoical fortitude they pulled and tugged at that vicious little centipede of a calf. Tom had seized it by its tail and hind feet, while Bert had climbed the

From An Oregon Ranch

fence and gathered up its sprawling front legs, and together they were folding it over like an omelet, poking and pulling it sideways through the fence. At last the sufferer was released, but only to be instantly seized again by both men, who, clasping it in a damp embrace, bore it off down the hill, with all those bellowing bovines at their heels. As that solemn procession filed away, I had a haunting sense of having seen something like it in the sculptured frieze of some great public building. I watched until their burden was safely shoved into fields Elysian, the cows all walking in after it, and then three bars were put up — only three, a piece of carelessness which led to future trouble. I was pained to observe the other calf still walking around outside the fence.

Thinking I had done about all the good I could, I was going to retire quietly from the scene, when Tom called out, "Drop that pole and come and help catch this other calf." A hungry man is seldom a polite one. Obeying orders, I advanced unarmed down the hill. I saw at a glance that their plan was to surround and capture the calf where it stood, in a fence corner. I have a quick discernment of field tactics — inherited, most likely. The unsuspecting victim was gazing longingly through the fence at its mother, not noticing the environing forces; but just as we were about to close in upon it, it looked up, and, seeing three frightful ogres with arms outstretched,

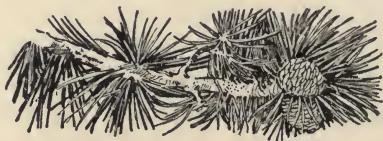
From An Oregon Ranch

gave a terrified leap through the cordon and went flying up the branch road. "The dun deer's hide to fleeter foot was never tied." Away we all went in hot pursuit. Not being much of a sprinter myself, I was soon left far in the wake. Suddenly the pursued, descrying a big pile of brush by the roadside and mistaking it for a rock of refuge, turned aside and dashed into it, and there, lacerated by thorns and briars, it began to roar. Hearing a bellowing and a thundering of hoofs behind me, I glanced back, and saw tearing up the road every last one of those infuriated cows. A steep hill slopes down to one side of the road; and up this height dashed the now poleless daughter of the Revolution, where, climbing high among the roots of a giant upturned fir tree, she surveyed the scene.

Just then a strange thing happened. I saw, as plainly as I now see this paper, the stage of a theater in a far distant city, and standing out upon a jutting cliff the tall picturesque figure of Meg Merrilies. Beyond, through trees and rocks, was a faint glimpse of a sullen sea; while immediately below her was a dark narrow glen lit up by gypsy campfires. Though at the time this seemed strange, I now see that the outlook from my lofty perch very naturally recalled this half-forgotten scene. Night was now coming on; low-lying mists upon the meadow gave to it in that half-light a look of the sea; all about me were the same dark hills, and below was just such a little

From An Oregon Ranch

glen as I had seen in my vision. There were no rocks and no campfires, but, instead, a big brush pile, teeming with life, a confused jumble of rubber coats, hoofs, and horns, and in its center the struggling calf sinking deeper at every lunge. Clawing over it were its would-be captors; on the outskirts those roaring bedlamites tossing the brush with hoofs, and horns. Dead ferns and wild blackberry vines clinging to her horns, the aged one looked a dangerous Nemesis—and was, too, for she had to be beaten back with brush. Doubtless Thomas would now have been glad of my pole. Finally the pitfall yielded up its victim, which was carried to a low place in the fence, and gently dropped into the fold. As soon as its voice was hushed, that concord of sweet sounds died away, the cows became submissive and were easily driven back into the meadow, and once again sweet peace descended on the Ranch of the Pointed Firs.





VIII

ON the morning following the "round-up" of our new cows, while breakfast was being prepared, Tom sallied forth with a bright new tin pail to do the milking. The cook, while striving to feel hopeful of the result, had secret misgivings, doubting very much whether the gentleman had ever milked a cow, as we had never before owned one; knowing, also, that if such were the case he never would admit it, and, if doubts were expressed, he would at once begin to talk about that summer he "worked for Uncle Jim." It seems that when a lad of twelve he spent one summer on his uncle's farm; and if he then did all the things he now thinks he did, he must have been a marvel of boyish industry and activity. Those seem to have been the red letter days of his life; perhaps there budded then a love of country life that eventually led to the possession

From An Oregon Ranch

of this mountain home. He has talked of that blessed summer all through the years, and I must confess there have been times in my life when those reminiscences seemed a burden and a weariness. Now, when he reverts to the subject, I can't help thinking of the never-ending regrets of Mrs. Blimber "that she had not known Cicero, and talked with him in his retirement at Tusculum, beautiful Tusculum." Rather than risk the revival of this Arcadian dream, I pretended to believe that Tom could milk.

After an absence of about an hour he came in, and from where I stood I could see nothing in the pail.

"Haven't you milked?"

"Sure!" he answered, waving the pail before me.

"Good gracious! Is that all?"

"Of course. How much did you expect?"

"Well, I should think two cows ought to give more than a pint of milk."

"No; this is just about right when the calves are with them."

In a day or two stalls were made for those voracious calves, and they were put on half-rations. Then I ventured to remark, "Now you will get milk galore."

"Well, yes; I ought to get a little more." The increase, however, was scarcely noticeable, which he explained by saying the cows wouldn't "give down"—"they never do when first separated from their

From An Oregon Ranch

calves." I believed this to be a bit of suddenly inspired fiction to cover his own shortcomings, but managed to hold my peace. I kept hoping and waiting for several days, and then one morning when he appeared with the usual quart, I quite forgot myself, and blazed forth with, "Tom Graham, I don't believe you know how to milk!"

You should have seen his look of indignant surprise! It was equal to Sairey Gamp's when the existence of her beloved Mrs. Harris was doubted.

"Know how? I guess you forget that summer I worked for Uncle Jim!"

"No; I have never been allowed to forget it. I suppose you milked a dozen cows then, night and morning, didn't you?"

"No, ma'am, I didn't; I milked five."

"If you did, it was so long ago that you have forgotten the art."

"No, milking is like swimming; the accomplishment, once acquired, is never forgotten." Presently he added thoughtfully, "Speaking just now of Uncle Jim reminds me—and I had forgotten to tell you about it—that I was down in the field the other morning, when suddenly out rang the clear notes of a bird, the same that I heard a thousand times that summer, tilting and liting from the tops of the tall rosin weeds. Here I found him poised on a branch of vine maple; but it was the very same bird, and for about a minute I was a straw-hatted, barefoot boy,

From An Oregon Ranch

going for the cows in Uncle Jim's pasture, wading through tall slough grass higher than my head. I could almost hear it rustling and feel the rushes crawling under my bare feet with a sort of squeaking sound, and all about me were those chipper little birds swaying upon the rosin weeds, singing as if to split their throats. I tell you, it is worth coming to Oregon just to hear and see that bird again."

This boyhood bird, so strangely reappearing in Tom's later life, seemed to afford him such genuine pleasure that I decided to accept it as a flag of truce, and suspend hostilities over the problem of the cows. In about another week the novice mastered the art of milking, the cows suddenly began to "give down," and from that time on we had abundance of milk.

Mary assured me they had had about the same experience at their place. I have not told you that Bert took possession of their new home the day after the late "round-up." Following the last load of goods was Bert, leading the big spotted cow — more correctly speaking, the big spotted cow leading Bert. Not quite liking her tricks and manners, I was glad to learn that she was his property and not ours. She had already acquired the name of Medusa. It came, Bert said, as an inspiration; watching me standing motionless so long, facing her, he believed I had been turned into stone.

The cows had no special names; all alike had been called "bossy." Now, surely a good cow is entitled

From An Oregon Ranch

to the distinction of a name. Anyway, we believe in naming them, and everything else on the place that is alive. We fancy, in our isolation, that with names they seem more human and companionable. We see so few people up here in the woods that we have to talk a good deal to the animals, lest we forget the habit of speech and all become mutes. So our two cows were named Dolly Varden and Maud Muller; but after a long acquaintance with Maud, we found she was not the guileless, rustic beauty she appeared. She was tricky, a schemer, and rather unprincipled, opening gates and barn doors with her horns, helping herself to provender at unseasonable hours, or, if attracted by the waving of feathery carrot and green turnip tops beyond a fence, she simply threw off the upper rails, and leaped over the remaining ones, as though she supposed those things were planted for her especial use, but through some oversight her attention had not been called to them. Owing to these characteristics, we felt obliged to change her name to Becky Sharp. The calves are known as Buttercup and Trilby, if you please—and you needn't laugh! You are thinking of the muddy little wretches that arrived here that rainy night; but you must remember this is written at a later date, and those calves grew in beauty with the springtime, and when June came they were as lovely as her roses. Such winsome, witching things you never saw; and if only Rosa Bonheur were alive, and I could have her do

From An Oregon Ranch

them in oil (for nothing), I'd send you their pictures as proof that this description is no flattery.

But I seem to have drifted far from my subject, and must go back and tell you of my first butter-making. For several days cream had been accumulating; and at last came a morning when there was enough for churning. A pleasurable excitement seized me, and I was all eagerness to begin the work. I had never in my life made a pound of butter, but you know there is a certain charm connected with every new experience—although at this later date my ardor has considerably diminished. After breakfast, I found our ranchmen had an errand at a sawmill back in the mountains. Mary was going with them, and I was urged to go too; but that churn was drawing me like a lodestone—not for worlds would I have left it. I had learned that a part of the road they were going over ran along a narrow ridge on either side of which was a deep canyon, a sort of Scylla and Charybdis affair; and having a horror of such a road, I made that my excuse for not going, not mentioning the churning, intending to surprise them agreeably on their return, both families being quite destitute of butter.

As soon as they were fairly off, I rushed for the churn—a barrel-shaped revolving affair, which, it seemed to me while lugging it in, ought to have been built on rollers or at least on casters. Then came the treasured can of cream, the butter bowl, ladle, mould,

From An Oregon Ranch

oiled paper, long-handled spoon, jar of salt, thermometer, teakettle of hot water, and two pamphlets on the art of butter-making. One of the latter had come with the churn, giving full instructions; the other, equally explicit, was from a state agricultural college. I sat down to consult these authorities.

“First scald the churn.” Easy enough! I poured in the boiling water, and began whirling the crank with great enthusiasm, when out popped the cork with a noise like the report of a Winchester, followed by a revolving stream of hot water and steam. The operator, though scared and trembling, stuck to her post, knowing the thing must be stopped, and stopped with the nozzle-end up, though several revolutions were made before this could be accomplished. The cork had blown to the other side of the room; but I dared not leave my post to get it—I felt sure that if the churn were released it would turn over and begin spouting again. It was plain the mountain must go to Mahomet; so, pushing the sputtering and pulsating machine across the floor, I reached and replaced the cork, hooked the churn back in its place, and then paused to consider—thankful indeed that my precious cream was not in the machine when the explosion occurred.

Turning again to my butter lore, I read: “Remove cork at intervals to allow escape of steam.” In my eagerness to get down to business, I had overlooked that detail. Well, the cork had removed itself, and

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that part of the affair was over; so I proceeded to mop up the overflow, looking ruefully at my new wall paper.

The next step was the heating of the cream, which my authorities said must be tested with the thermometer. Then came the proudest moment of my life. I felt, perhaps, as does a great scientist, shut up in his laboratory, engaged in some wonderful chemical experiment that may startle a waiting world. Slowly the temperature of the cream rose to $62\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$. I could not understand its slowness—mine having risen to at least 150° in the same time. The critical moment had arrived. The rich Jersey cream was poured into the churn, the lid clamped down, the cork pounded in with the potato masher. The operator, seated, with book in hand, now read: "Eighty revolutions per minute the proper rate of speed." To a lady of quiet habits that seemed "the pace that kills," but at it I went with might and main, whirling the crank so fast I couldn't count; it might have been eight hundred instead of eighty times per minute. Anyway, I got scared, thinking a hot-box might be the next feature; so I slowed down to perhaps eight revolutions a minute.

More comfortable now, I looked at the churning equipment, thinking all butter makers should have a dairy room where such things could be kept, and not need to be collected from the four quarters of the globe when wanted. I rather fancied I'd like such

From An Oregon Ranch

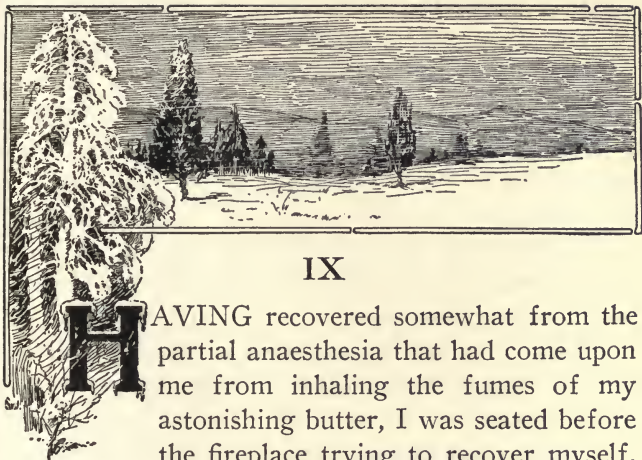
a one as Queen Victoria had at Balmoral Castle; but that seemed almost too aspiring. I then fell back on Mrs. Poyser's, as described by George Eliot: "The dairy was certainly worth looking at. A scene to sicken for in hot and dusty streets — such coolness, such purity, such fresh fragrance of new-pressed cheese, of firm butter, of wooden vessels perpetually bathed in pure water; such soft coloring of red earthenware and creamy surfaces, brown wood and polished tin, gray limestone and rich orange rust on the iron weights and hooks and hinges." Then, naturally, I fell a-thinking of the bewitching Hetty — of the rose-petal cheeks, the round dimpled arms and pretty hands tossing and patting the butter, losing myself in the tragical story of that young life until recalled to consciousness by a queer slushing about of the cream in my own churn. Looking in the glass at the top of the churn, I was terrified to see that it was quite clear, and the book said, when that occurred, "STOP," in letters about the size of those seen at railroad crossings.

Trembling with the fear that all was lost, I nervously removed the lid, glanced in, and, lo! there was the butter, just as predicted by the sages, "golden globules half the size of a kernel of wheat." Oh, the pride of Miss McBride, as she drew off the buttermilk, rinsing the butter three times in pure spring water, scalding and cooling the bowl, taking out that mass of golden glory, sprinkling salt over it, and

From An Oregon Ranch

then trying desperately to "work it," like one to the manner born.

My instructions were, after the first working, to set it aside for five hours; this seemed a cruel delay, but, mine "not to reason why," I was about to obey orders, when it occurred to me that in my excitement I had forgotten to taste it. And then I had a surprise and shock I am not likely to forget. As the flavor reached my palate, I recoiled and stood aghast. How could anything so beautiful possibly taste so vile? It surely had not absorbed the odors of cookery, as the cream had been kept out in the pure air. Yet there it was—a bad-tasting, ill-smelling lump of yellow hypocrisy. At first I thought I'd carry it up the yard to a thicket of salmon bushes so dense no human being could penetrate it, hurl the mass of iniquity into its most secret fastnesses, then hurry back and remove all traces of the late struggle before the "return of the natives," and never tell a living soul about it. But I soon saw that scheme would never work. Tom had been as proud as Punch over that cream; he would miss it, and explanations would be called for. So I sat down, and mused drearily upon the Wandering Willies' return and the horrible surprise awaiting them.



IX

HAVING recovered somewhat from the partial anaesthesia that had come upon me from inhaling the fumes of my astonishing butter, I was seated before the fireplace trying to recover myself, when the excursionists rushed in, jubilant over the picturesque scenery of their drive.

“Oh, but you missed a good thing by not going with us!” they exclaimed.

“I am not so sure of that,” retorted the angel of the hearth.

“We’ve had the time of our lives!”

“So have I,” I tranquilly replied.

“What doing—trout-fishing?”

“Just compose yourselves and I’ll show you.” Then I went out and brought in the butter. As the napkin was lifted, disclosing that mass of golden

From An Oregon Ranch

deception, there arose a universal chorus of delight and admiration.

"What lovely butter!" cried Mary. "Did you really make it yourself?"

"Why, you're a butter maker indeed!" exclaimed Tom. "We're proud of you!"

My knowledge of the baleful aftermath kept me reasonably calm under this shower of compliments. "Now you must all come out in the dining room and sample it," I said.

Supplied with forks, each took a generous dose. Then they glared at each other, dismay and disgust upon every countenance.

"Shades of the mighty!" cried Tom. "What flavoring did you use—sage, parsley, bergamot, or wild onions?"

"Seems more like paregoric or linseed oil," sputtered Bert.

Mary—I suppose through sympathy for me—said nothing, but I observed that she was drinking water copiously.

"Are you sure, Katharine, that you didn't use Epsom or Rochelle salts in this stuff?"

"No, Tom; the salt used was the right brand."

"Well, what the dickens does ail it?"

No one being able to diagnose the case, we all sat down around that diabolical bowl and held a sort of round table talk. The pronounced herby flavor suggesting the pasture, the men remembered that

From An Oregon Ranch

quantities of mint grew there; also dandelion, dock, English yarrow, sorrel, and similar things. Of course, the cows had eaten them, and this was the direful result. During this conference it became known that everyone had noticed a peculiar tang to the milk, but, through loyalty to the cows, none had spoken of it.

"And now, fellow citizens," said Tom, "what disposition are we to make of this delectable pot-pourri?"

"Well, Bert will take a part of it, and—"

"Not by a good deal!" interrupted that gentleman, hastily.

"It was your own proposal!"

"Yes, but you must remember that was before taking."

"Very well, sir," I replied with wounded dignity, "the product of our dairy is not forced upon our friends."

"For which praise God, from whom all blessings flow!" retorted that irreverent individual.

"Well, then, this butter must be sold."

"Katharine, you are beside yourself; much churning hath made you mad! Are you so lacking in moral principle as to sell what you yourself cannot eat?"

"Yes, sir; I am. I fancy Oregonians are accustomed to this flavor in early spring butter and rather like it."

From An Oregon Ranch

"You'll never catch me in the busy marts of men with this stuff for sale."

"Of course, not as our own; it must be disposed of anonymously or under a *nom de plume*. You take it to the metropolis, lay in your grocery supplies, then say quite innocently, 'Oh, by the way, a lady sent in some butter with me; came near forgetting it.' Produce it, and then fly for your life."

"But those men know all the butter makers of the country, and that groceryman will ask, 'Whose butter is this?'"

"Then look him square in the eye and say, 'Mrs. Jacob Ruggles's butter.' Whereupon he will frown reflectively, saying, 'Ruggles, Ruggles—I can't recall any Ruggles up your way.' Tell him they are newcomers from the Kentucky bluegrass region."

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practise to deceive,"

sighed Mary.

"That's so, Mary; we're getting tangled in a labyrinth of lies. Let's try a new tack. How would this do? You remember, Katharine, that set of old tin candle-moulds that I raked out from under the porch? Well, say we melt this stuff, mould it in those things, make Roman candles of it, and then throw them on the market about the Fourth of July. I'm sure they'll go off with a boom."

From An Oregon Ranch

With this brilliant suggestion the conference broke up.

And now you have our first experience in butter-making. The surprise was never eaten; Tom used it for axle grease—to my lasting humiliation. Two or three weeks later the butter suddenly became sweet and delicious. Then I knew the joy of the Ancient Mariner when the dead albatross fell from his neck.

But it occurs to me that in your eastern home you will be in the swirl of holiday festivities when this rigmarole reaches you, and will scarcely have time to read it. Up here in the Oregon hills there is none of that "Christmas feel in the air" that Riley speaks of, and we can hardly realize that the event is but three days off. Thinking of it one cannot help longing a little for brilliantly illuminated streets and stores, spectacular show windows, the hurrying and jostling throng of Christmas shoppers, the bundle-laden crowds of the streets and trolley cars, the art exhibits, theaters, concerts, and the fine Christmas music of the churches. What would I not give to hear once again the deep rolling waves of harmony from a big pipe organ, thrilling and uplifting the soul! But perhaps most of all just at this time we miss our dear old fun-loving friends, dropping in at all hours, brimming over with bright talk of secret plans and projects. Here we have none of that companionship. You will think it incredible when I tell

From An Oregon Ranch

you that since last July I have not spoken to a woman — nor a man, either, except the occasional workmen we have employed — always, of course, excepting the other two members of our quartet. The most of our near neighbors are men “keeping bachelor’s hall” — interested, I suppose, in their own problems of life, with no time for visiting. Do you wonder that we talk to our dumb friends, the animals?

We were pleased when one night last week the weather suddenly turned cold, freezing the ground slightly. The next morning the air was cool, crisp, and delightfully exhilarating, much like our weather at home — only, of course, not so cold. Every blade of grass, bush, twig, and tree had a covering of hoar frost; even the fir trees were decked in white robes for the coming Christmas carnival. Later in the day the sun turned on his flashlight, showering all with diamond dust as a finishing touch. Such purity, such whiteness and glitter! Our little hill-guarded glen was for two whole days a veritable fairyland, and we were grateful for the usual holiday setting, though the festivities were lacking. But on Saturday evening dull leaden clouds came up from the sea, and an hour later we groaned in spirit as the rain poured heavily upon the roof. Sunday morning we found all our frosty splendor vanished; the firs were in their sober every-day gowns, with misty veils flying about their

From An Oregon Ranch

heads, while down from the hills floated a tearful *Miserere*. Perhaps, having shown a foolish pride in their snowy vestments, Dame Nature had as a punishment folded them away and condemned the firs to the "wearing of the green" again, with banishment from the Santa Claus pageant.

That evening, as the rain tinkled against the window panes, Tom said, "This isn't very Christmasy, but let's read the old "Carol" again, just for luck."

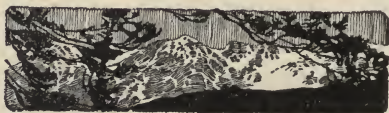
For many years, at this season, it has been our custom to read aloud Dickens's "Christmas Carol," just to get in tune with the spirit of the blessed Yuletide; now, looking through our bookshelves, it was not to be found—probably loaned to some one in the old home and thus left behind. So even that pleasure was denied us.

This afternoon we went up into the forest in search of Christmas decorations. Cloudy and dark outside, inside the woods we found the duskiness of twilight—a restful solitude, solemn and still. Underneath our feet was a carpet of emerald moss, soft and velvety; overhead, a canopy of green so dense that not even a passing cloud could peer through it. All around us were the graceful, motionless fronds of the magnificent sword fern, and pretty autumn-tinted climbing and trailing vines. Truly, the groves were not only God's first temples, but his best, truest, and holiest always. We felt loath to leave such a peaceful sanctuary, loitering

From An Oregon Ranch

along in its cool moist gloom, selecting our woodland treasures with perplexity because of their bewildering profusion and perfection.

As we came out of the forest, just in its edge we scared up a flock of mountain quail. A whir of wings, a flash of jaunty topknots, and they were gone. A bushy-tailed squirrel frisked along the top rail of the fence. A saucy bluejay scolded us from the silvery moss of a young oak—a fine setting for his military jacket. As we found it raining briskly out in the open, we took a short cut home, along the crest of a very high hill. We arrived none too soon, for as we entered the shelter of the porch a deluge descended, and all the evening it has rained steadily and drearily. Ordinarily I don't much mind it; but just now I long for the old-time biting, nipping cold, for crunching snow, and merry jingling sleigh bells. Don't think that I am homesick; I am not, but I'd like to be with you all for the next two weeks, and then fly straight back to my beloved hills of Oregon.





X

Y^{es.} YOU must not rashly infer, from the close of my last letter, that we were enveloped in a pall of homesickness on the occasion of our first Christmas on a ranch. It is true that the day was not the maddest, merriest one of all the year for us, and perhaps a knowledge of the privations here may heighten appreciation of the fullness of your own holiday season. So up goes the curtain for the Christmas scene at the Ranch of the Pointed Firs.

First, you must know that, as is usual here in winter, the roads are bottomless. Turkey, cranberries, mince pie ingredients, Christmas remembrances, all such essentials, are twenty miles away, and as unattainable as if in Darkest Africa. Neither friend nor stranger could be hoped for within our gates. The decoration of the old house in recognition of the day seemed the only pleasure left us; and for

From An Oregon Ranch

this, Nature stood at our very door offering a wealth of greenery. Every evil has its good, and this is one of Oregon's compensations for her deplorable roads.

Bert and Mary were to spend Christmas with us. The day before, early in the morning, they appeared upon the scene with an old sled drawn through the mud, laden with choice branches of arbor vitae and mistletoe; the driver walking, lines in hand, the lady crouching in the green jungle like a wood-nymph. This contribution was added to our collection; then with scissors and baskets, Mary and I took a turn along an old rail fence where wild roses grow luxuriantly, cutting and filling our baskets with the long brown stems, each bearing clusters of scarlet rose-apples just the tint of holly berries. You who are accustomed to the low-growing wild rose of the East will accuse me of romancing when I tell you that those bushes were much higher than our heads. In the summer the fences are hidden by them. When showered by thousands of pink blooms, their beauty and perfume beguile one into the belief that these old lanes lead straight to Paradise. Alice Cary should have lived here; you remember she wrote —

“And if my eyes all flowers but one must lose,
Our wild sweet-brier would be the one to choose.”

Bringing our seed treasures home, and judiciously mingling them with the dark green of the buck-

From An Oregon Ranch

thorn, a species of holly was evolved rivaling if not surpassing the original. The transformation began in our main living room. The ugly wall paper and paint we found here have vanished, and we have sage green walls, with white woodwork except about the old fireplace, which is of black enamel. The mantel we banked high with our "Oregon holly," with statuettes of "Diana" and "The Wrestlers" half concealed among the leaves. Just below the mantel was placed a long narrow picture in black and white—a fur-enveloped Santa Claus, with frisky reindeer dashing through a snowy moonlit forest (set in black)—holly gleaming above, and the fire below flanked on one side by the brass fire utensils, on the other by a brass umbrella stand overflowing with holly branches. The doors and low bookcases were crowned with holly; bunches of it tied with scarlet ribbon were hung above pictures, and vases and rose bowls were filled. The windows were embowered with ferns. An immense bunch of mistletoe suspended by white satin ribbon swung from the center of the room—not the stiff, dry, crackly kind of other days, but gathered that morning fresh from the oaks, and white with berries.

The artists next advanced upon the dining room—which, being very dark, is the dungeon of this house, white paint and yellow ingrain paper struggling bravely to lighten the gloom. We made a frieze of arbor vitae around the room, just above

From An Oregon Ranch

the picture moulding, about two feet in width—a task not at all difficult, as we could tack the branches to the wall undismayed by fear of falling plaster, for, for some inscrutable reason, plaster is not much used here. In place of it we have cheesecloth tacked to the board wall; and upon this the paper is pasted. It seems queer, but looks well, and one can drive a nail into it without having a man sound the wall with a hammer in an effort to find the studding.

Upon each end of our sideboard stood a red jardiniere containing a small Christmas tree; between them was a punch bowl filled with the sweeping fronds of the sword fern; and shining amid this greenery was a hydra-headed brass candlestick, with red candles. The table was then formally laid for the coming banquet. A centerpiece being in order, and lacking a green jardiniere, we took a wire basket used for frying croquettes and lined it with moss—the exquisite kind that seems woven of miniature ferns—green side out of course, and well pushed through, concealing the wires. In this we planted our loveliest little fir tree. Red berries were strung and festooned through its lower branches, the upper ones embellished with tiny red candles left over from previous decorations at our eastern home. Placing this centerpiece upon a round mirror in the center of the table, we rested from our labors by the old stone fireplace, the one and only interior jewel of this mountain home.

From An Oregon Ranch

Sitting that evening by our fireside, watching the flare and flicker of the flames, we saw passing the long procession of dead and gone Christmases which, viewed in retrospect, bring only sadness. Through filmy azure smoke came dear shadowy faces, looking back from the misty borderlands of "That Undiscovered Country" — faces one dare not recall even in memory lest that long-smouldering pain in the heart blaze up again with all its old-time fierceness. Listening to the rain and the noisy fall of waters from the hillside spring, with the loud roaring of the mountain brook dashing through our little glen, I felt as never before the pathos of those lines in "In Memoriam" —

"We live within the stranger's land,
And strangely falls our Christmas eve."

The next morning, while waiting for Tom to come to breakfast, I stepped out on the porch to see how Christmas really looked in "the stranger's land." The scene, though not particularly enlivening, might easily have been worse. High up in one corner of the yard was a melancholy tangle of salmon bushes, skirted on two sides by an old mossy paling fence and leafless trees; struggling down from this were clumps of wet brown ferns, gaunt mullein stalks, and frowzy-headed thistles; a gray alder was bending over a mossy spring at the end

From An Oregon Ranch

of the porch, rainy tears trickling through its bare branches and splashing into the waters beneath. Farther away were dark ploughed fields; above them, gray mists rolling stormily through the hills; and grayer than all else, "that inverted bowl they call the sky," its rim resting upon the green coronet of encircling hills. This might seem a gloomy picture; in reality, it was one of tender and shadowy beauty. The sublimity and picturesqueness of Oregon scenery triumph over the worst of weather. Just then I recalled a few snowless Christmases at home — dull skies, frozen ground, icy winds blowing a gale, and only streets and houses to be seen. I could not but think how infinitely better was this wilder landscape, with its mingled green and grayness shut in by the gray bowl above; and then and there I gave thanks to our Heavenly Pilot for leading us into this wonderful "land o' glamour."

When we first came here the scenes and sounds impressed me as vaguely familiar — almost as if I had lived here in some forgotten time long past. I had a haunting sense of its being some part of my life's tangle; but such a hopeless snarl it seemed, that I had about concluded to call it a vagary of the imagination, when one day Bert came in, saying, "The torrent roars in the vale; blue mists rise in the hills; dark clouds rest upon the head of Mount Nebo." These sentences, as soon as heard, solved

From An Oregon Ranch

my mental perplexities. We were living again in Ossian's land, where in early girlhood I had dwelt in fancy while turning the fascinating pages of an old black-and-gold Russia leather copy of Ossian's poems. Bert's words were like a searchlight turned upon the darkened past. The rosy skies of youth flashed up; in that luminous atmosphere floated many changeful pictures. The blue sea was there, with Fingal's black bounding ships with their white sails; warlike hosts with shining shields and spears, their "red eyes rolling on the foe." There too were the ghosts of Arden, "with stars dim twinkling through their forms." Mountains too were there, and rocks, caves, woods, pines, bearded oaks, and foaming torrents. Only the most unimaginative could live in Oregon and not hark back to Ossian. Hear how well he describes our own mountain eyrie: "The rain beats hard; the strength of the mountain streams comes roaring down the hills." "The blue stream roars in the vale; the thistle shakes there its lonely head; the moss whistles in the wind." "Autumn is dark on the mountains; gray mists rest in the hills." "A green field in the bosom of hills." "Rain gathers round the head of Cromla; the stars of the north shake heads of fire through the flying mists of heaven." Now, if you want to know just what Oregon is like, read Ossian. We are a little short, it is true, of kings, warriors, bards, harps, and ghosts; but all the rest is here.

From An Oregon Ranch

But I am straying from my subject. Breakfast over, the Plymouth Rock fowl safely landed in the oven, the plum pudding steaming, vegetables prepared for cooking, feeling then that what Mrs. Carlyle calls "The Cares of Bread" were off my mind for a time, I said, "Tom, let's go now and open our Christmas packages." We had no gifts for each other, owing to the condition of the roads that we must travel to get them; but many boxes and packages from unforgetting friends at home had arrived the previous week, and been kept inviolate, as is our custom, until Christmas day. Very soon we were cutting cords and untying ribbons, with exclamations of delight and surprise as the various tokens of loving remembrance came to light—rainbow scarfs as filmy as mist, late fichus, fancy aprons, exquisite doilies, chatelaine bags, cushion covers, books, magazines, pictures, calendars, and all such things. One would need to live a whole year in the solitude of the woods to understand my pleasure in again seeing novel and up-to-date things from the great world "that roars and frets in the distance."

One little gift was rather funny; and though it seems ungracious, I can't resist telling you about it. It was marked "From Christine"—a Swedish girl who lived with us many years—a bright, cheerful, lovable girl; and I wish to goodness she was flying about my kitchen this blessed minute, singing those queer old Scandinavian songs with a voice as clear .

From An Oregon Ranch

and sweet as a lark's. Though Christine can sing like a bird, she certainly is not an art connoisseur. Her gift was an offering in burnt wood, representing a large unhappy looking lady with a badly swollen cheek and painfully protruding eyes. I had hardly sufficient courage to look at it, but, well knowing poor Christine's pleasure in sending it, resolved to bear it as best I could. With shuddering tenderness I lifted it to the mantel. "Tom, look at Christine's gift—for us both, she said." He stood awhile before it, then turned away saying, "You can have it all!"

The burnt-wood figure was but a forerunner of worse to follow. Being a woman, Nell, you can understand the significance of the next thing unearthed—a black knit shoulder shawl with a purple border.

"Oh, Tom!" I cried, "for mercy's sake, look at this!"

"Well, what about it?"

"What about it? Why, don't you know it's the very first shaft from Old Age's quiver? It means that my sear and yellow days have come; that—

'The Bird of Time has but a little way
To flutter—and the bird is on the wing.'

"Oh, nonsense!"

"Well, don't I know, Tom? I've been giving things like this to old ladies all my life."

From An Oregon Ranch

"And now your chickens have come home to roost, and the iron has entered your own soul! Who sent it?"

"Your Aunt Sarah, with this package for you — and here's a note in which she says, 'You speak, Katharine, of living in a box-house. Now, I hardly know what that means, but it sounds cold and must be draughty; so I send you this little cape, hoping you may find in it agreeable warmth.'"

Agreeable warmth! If ever a woman lived who found agreeable warmth in her first black-and-purple shoulder shawl, history has failed to mention her.

"What's this thing?" now came inquiringly from Tom, as he held up a bib-shaped scarlet felt affair.

"Mercy! I don't know, but perhaps this note will explain."

"Yes, here it is. 'I have been feeling anxious about Thomas, working as he does in the rain. Do, please, see that he wears the chest protector I send. One can't be too careful of one's health at his time of life.'"

"Now, madam, you added that last line!"

"No, sir, here it is in black and white; read for yourself."

Just then a couple of umbrellas passed the window; the shawl was jerked from my hand and wrapped round the "life-saver," and both were hurriedly tucked behind a sofa pillow, as Tom whis-

From An Oregon Ranch

pered, "Katharine, don't say a word about these things until we hear how they came out."

After Bert and Mary had come in and the little confusion of their arrival had subsided, and they had carefully looked over our Christmas exhibit, Bert's roving eyes fell upon Christine's gift.

"Hello! where did you get the lumpy-jawed, frog-eyed lady?"

"You are most intolerably rude, Mr. Stanhope, so harshly to criticize a work of art found in the home of your hostess."

"Art! did you say, Katharine? Well, if that sort of art is rampant in the world just now, then I am mighty glad I've taken to the woods."

Scorning further talk with this degenerate son of the hills, I turned to hear of Mary's presents, listening eagerly, almost despairingly, as she ran over a most acceptable list. Thinking she had glided by a pair of slippers with suspicious haste, I asked what kind they were.

"Oh, just common ones."

"Felt?"

"No, cloth."

"Lined with fur?"

"No, lamb's wool," answered Bert, with a man's blundering frankness.

Smothering my joy, I exclaimed sympathetically, "What a shame! Those are real old ladies' slippers."

From An Oregon Ranch

"Too bad! Too bad!" came hypocritically from Tom, poking the fire to conceal his delight.

"Yes, they gave me a shock," admitted the sufferer. "Of course, I knew those woolen monstrosities were lying in wait for me somewhere along the years, but I hardly expected them to bounce out just yet."

"Come, Bert, walk up to the confessional!"

"Oh, I've nothing scary; old age has drawn no bead on me;" and he rattled off an inoffensive list.

Revenge is sweet, and now his wife said sweetly, "Bert, you quite forgot to mention those flannel pajamas your sister sent you."

"Flannel!" shrieked Tom. "Outrageous! Red?"

"No, sir, not red. Moonlight on the lake, stitched with old gold."

"But flannel! Why, Bert, that's a gift for an octogenarian, for lean and slippered age—'sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.'"

"Go on," wailed his victim, "pour vitriol in my wounds."

"No, my decrepit flannel-scourged brother, I can't consistently do that, because, you see, we've some woolly woes of our own to bear," dragging them from their lair and waving them aloft as he sang—

"Lift up your eyes, desponding freemen,
Fling to the wind your needless fears!"

From An Oregon Ranch

When Mary's eyes fell upon the black-and-purple disturber of the peace, her glee struck me as little short of fiendish. I hate to see such malevolence in a woman; though she said tenderly enough, "What a shame, Katharine! I thought only real old ladies wore such things!"

"Oh, you did? Which only shows, madam, that you are living back in the Oregon hills; no doubt, young girls are now wearing these at their coming-out parties."

Meantime Tom had donned the scarlet bib, and a voice was saying, "Well, I don't know how you feel, but that thing would be gall and wormwood to me."

"Think so, Bert? It is balm of Gilead compared with the note that came from the hand that dealt the blow."

Being all in the same boat, we grew rather jolly over it, and began laughingly to picture Christmases to come, when we should sit around this fireplace surrounded by such heart-rending tokens of affection as bottles of liniment, porous plasters, hot water bottles, stout canes with arched necks, spectacle cases, red flannel nightcaps, earmuffs, and woolen scarfs and nubias to wind about our neuralgic heads. Of course, old people wouldn't be supposed to care for works of fiction, and they would send us "Pilgrim's Progress" in very large type, "No Cross, No Crown," "Fox's Book of Martyrs," "Stepping Heavenward," and similarly consoling literature.

From An Oregon Ranch

At dinner-time the heavens grew black, the rain was pouring in torrents, and Mary and I were glad that we had previously arranged for lighting the dining room. With candles and lamps blazing, radiating cheerfulness, our decorations showed up finely. The "Plymouth Rock," occupying a position of honor, tried hard to look as big as a turkey; we stood by him loyally, praising his appearance and reviling turkey. When the time for dessert arrived and the steaming plum pudding was brought in, wreathed with real holly taken from our Christmas boxes, if any longings for mince pie were felt they were bravely repressed. That pudding was good, if I do say it; and the guests spoke up quite boldly, declaring that "Mrs. Bob Cratchit" never achieved a greater success. I forgot to mention the gift of a fruit cake, which was added to our menu, and a more delicious one had never been transported by overland express. Of course we couldn't have ice cream in an iceless land, but we could and did have whipped cream and damson preserves, which everybody said "was enough sight better." So, with a little bravado, our Christmas dinner passed off very well.



XI

I BELIEVE it now, Nell, to be my duty to give you our experience in the egg and poultry business. You may remember that the day our cows came to their new home several coops of chickens were brought with them; also that this occurred soon after we had moved here, when we were mud-bound in these hills, with nothing to eat but bacon and "spuds," not having seen an egg for weeks. Well, the following morning, bright and early, those coops were thrown open, their unhappy prisoners fluttering out to freedom with a mighty clamor; and as they went crowing and cackling about the old log barn, their owners thought it the sweetest music ever heard. All day long I could think of nothing but those blessed hens, and the various ways of cooking eggs. For supper that night I had planned such an omelet as the world has scarcely seen; and for

From An Oregon Ranch

the next day, ham and eggs for breakfast, custard pie for dinner, and deviled eggs for supper. That seemed the longest day I had ever known; but finally the clock struck five.

"Come, Tom, it's time to gather the eggs," I said, as I handed him a peach basket nicely lined with paper.

"At Uncle Jim's we always gathered them in our hats," he murmured reminiscently, as he marched off with it. During his absence I got out the long-unused Dover eggbeater and two bowls of large size, put the skillet on the stove, and stood ready for the fray. After some anxious waiting, in walked the gentleman with the basket bottom-side up, and never an egg in it. I stood in speechless amazement, looking at that empty basket, until Tom cried —

"Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it break."

"Well, let it break! that would be better than slow starvation!"

"You are disappointed now, aren't you, Katharine?"

"Of course I am, and I'm hungry, and I thought it was a hen's business to lay eggs; and as we have forty-eight of them —"

"You thought," he interrupted, "that we would get forty-eight eggs, did you?"

From An Oregon Ranch

I'll just tell you in confidence, Nell, that I had thought of forty-eight in my most sanguine moments; but now, under the amused looks of my inquisitor, I snapped out, "Of course not; I'm not so much of an innocent as to expect to leap from nothing to such sudden affluence; but I did look for two dozen eggs or so—and it was not at all unreasonable, with all that mob of hens!"

"Come to think of it," meekly answered the bearer of the eggless basket, "I have heard that hens never lay just at first, upon making a change of location;" adding consolingly, "but I guess we'll get a half-dozen or so tomorrow."

Several more days passed, and still there was no offering from the poultry yard. I then ventured to ask, "Tom, do you think you feed the chickens enough?"

"Feed them enough? They look as if suffering from goiter; their crops are puffed out like toy balloons."

"Then perhaps you feed them too much."

"There you go now!"

"Well, I read today that hens should forage for a part of their living."

"But if they won't forage, what then? These chickens just stand on tiptoe round the granary, with their eyes fastened on the door, and never budge from there until it is time to waddle off to bed."

A depressing silence followed this declaration; it

From An Oregon Ranch

certainly seemed a most baffling problem. After deep thought the lady remarked: "I've just been wondering, Tom, whether you really know how to hunt hens' nests."

"Good gracious, Katharine! I should think almost any man of average sense could, if he would bring the weight of his intellect to bear upon it, hunt hens' nests!"

"You know that I mean *find* nests!"

"I can find these all right, having made them myself."

"Oh! have you made some nests?"

"Have I? I've put up so many boxes the barn looks like a post office."

"Yes; but the article I read today said that hens liked secluded places for nests."

"All right! I am fully prepared for the cloister-loving sisters. I've made nests under the mangers and in old barrels standing in dark corners, one in an old copper boiler, two choice ones in a disabled feed box—all that mortal man can do has been done, and now 'Serene I fold my hands and wait.'"

But this persistent woman wasn't quite so serene. That night, when the gentleman was about to go through the usual form of looking for eggs, she remarked sagely, "It is more than likely those hens have hidden their nests; the article I read today says they often hide them, and I believe I'll go with you and help search for them."

From An Oregon Ranch

"It's no use, and it's awfully muddy; but if nothing else will satisfy you, come on; only do leave that confounded basket—I'm sick of the sight of it."

Permission being thus graciously tendered, with becoming humility I followed my Chesterfieldian guide into the domains of chickendom. Then the still-hunt began. We searched high and low; inside, outside, and under the barn; looking through all the sheds, in clumps of ferns, and in the low bushes along the fence; peering into hollow logs and stumps as gravely and anxiously as if searching for the treasures of Captain Kidd.

Though our quest was fruitless, I learned that there are worse things in life than hunting for eggs on an Oregon ranch. Those old logs and stumps mantled in pretty green moss gave out an agreeable damp woodsy smell; the wet fir boughs exhaled a pleasant perfume; and just before us rushed the noisy little brook, its clear waters flashing through the tawny tassels of alders and overhanging willows decked with downy gray-green catkins, charming prophecies of swift-coming spring. And suddenly we came upon spring herself, in the guise of a little tree covered with delicate white pendent blossoms. In almost breathless excitement we broke off some of the pretty branches, the first wild blooms we had gathered in Oregon. It was to us then a beautiful stranger; we have

From An Oregon Ranch

since learned that it was the Indian peach tree. In summertime its branches are laden with perfectly formed though very tiny peaches; they look hard and forbidding, and lacking the courage of the aborigines, we have not tasted them.

Returning eggless to the house, Tom remarked resignedly, "Bert's folks are in the same boat; that's some comfort!"

"No, they are not; they have had three eggs. Mary told me so today."

"Great Scott! I wonder Bert didn't fire off a twenty-four-pounder after such an event!"

The report of those three eggs came to Tom like the explosion of a bomb in our camp. He declared fiercely that something must be done at once to stimulate the industry of our poultry yard.

"Let's make them a hot mash," I suggested; "the article I read today advised it."

"Great earth, Katharine! If you will kindly refrain from any further mention of 'that article,' I'll make 'em a hot mash every hour in the day and every day in the year."

"It's just possible that you would overdo it," retorted the aggrieved lady.

The next morning I prepared the "hot mash," a terrible mess of corn meal and bacon, and while I was deluging it with cayenne pepper the man of the house entered, and with that phenomenal memory of his remarked that "Uncle Jim's folks" used black

From An Oregon Ranch

pepper ; so we put in both. Then rummaging among various condiments, he exclaimed: "Paprika! That's hot stuff! We'll give 'em a dose. Mustard, stimulating and inspiring! Three tablespoonfuls will be about right. Ginger! Now we've struck it! —our hens lack ginger. Curry powder! What think you of that, Katharine?"

"It may be the one thing needful."

"All right, in it goes!"

Liberally salted and stirred, the dish was pronounced fit for the gods. With the mixture in one hand, a dish of cold boiled potatoes in the other, the experimenter then advanced hopefully upon his victims.

Returning after a brief absence, he was asked, "How did those feathered frauds like their breakfast?"

"Oh, fine ; they would eat live coals, I guess — all but Mrs. Gummidge" — a name he had given to a fussy, complaining old hen in a rusty black gown. "I first deferentially offered her the potatoes ; she advanced, mournfully, slowly drew up one foot, turned her head sideways, glared at them for one awful moment, and then turned scornfully away."

"Why didn't you try her with the hot Scotch?"

"I did ; she took one nip, and walked off gloomily among the weeds."

"Well, you see, Tom, down at Yarmouth Mrs. Gummidge ate marine food, and she isn't quite used

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to mountain fare yet. I really think the poor old thing is homesick."

A few days later he came in, shouting jubilantly, "Hurrah for Graham's celebrated Poultry Tonic! Allow me, madam, to present you with the first product of our poultry yard."

"Oh, Tom, an egg! How lovely! Isn't it white?"

"Yes, and uncommon large, don't you think?"

"It is very large, and such a perfect oval!"

"I am inclined to think it's a double-yolker," he answered, eying it hungrily.

"Alas, Tom! the egg is but one, and we are two."

A momentary struggle with self; then he said grandly, "You cook it and eat it, Katharine."

The offered sacrifice I regard as the noblest impulse of Thomas Graham's life, and I do hope that his recording angel made a note of it. I was not quite selfish enough to take advantage of his magnanimity, and yet was so lacking of the stuff of which heroes are made that I could not sit calmly by and see him eat the precious egg alone. So it was regretfully laid away until another should be found. After three more days of suspense, Tom came in, saying, "What do you think of this insolence?" handing me an egg no larger than a quail's.

That little egg instantly evoked from memory a picture of the garden of "The House of the Seven Gables," and stalking about in it, "with the dignity

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of interminable descent," a grotesque little chanti-cleer, followed by his two little wives "and the one chicken of the world."

I asked Tom if he thought it possible we had become the owners of one of the Pyncheon fowls.

"I don't remember them."

"Yes, you do; the heirloom of the Pyncheon family" — mentioning some of their characteristics.

"Oh, yes! Now I know; according to tradition, they were once the size of turkeys, but had sort of petered out, like the family, until they became no larger than pigeons. I fancy the three venerable ancestors having died of old age, the youngest and sole survivor of that aristocratic race, finding it dull alone in the old garden, with perhaps a scarcity of snails about Maule's well, started out to see the world, and has been led by kindly fate to the Ranch of the Pointed Firs, and that we now own that remarkable chicken, 'that looked small enough to still be in the egg, and at the same time sufficiently old, withered, wizened, and experienced to have been the founder of an antiquated race.'"

We were so entertained by this notion that our disappointment was half forgotten, though Tom did say, "The eggs of those ancient fowls were famous for rare delicacy of flavor; and you might cook the two tonight, if in the flavor of the one you could find compensation for the size of the other."

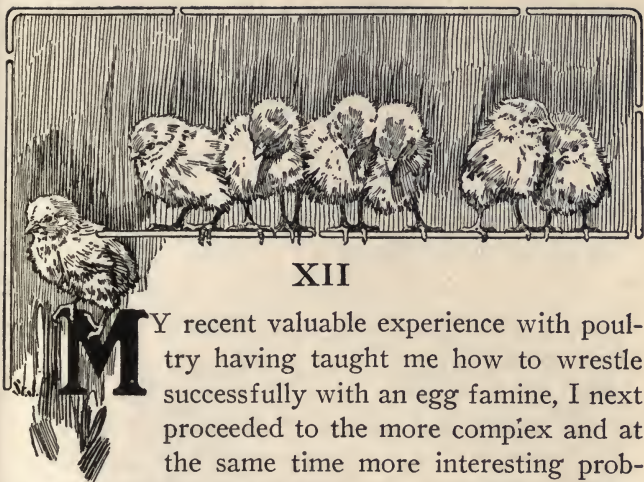
"Which I couldn't, so we'll just bide a wee."

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The very next day our impatience was rewarded by another egg of normal size. We ate the two with cannibalistic ferocity, and looked longingly at the shells.

Being a truthful chronicler, I cannot say that after this the eggs poured in in great abundance. That was our first experience of owning chickens, and also our first experience of a scarcity of eggs. Before embarking upon this enterprise, while gloating over the pages of poultry catalogues, we had visions—at least I had—of sending baskets, and even tubs, of eggs to the market. Alas, for human hopes, even in the magical land of Oregon!





XII

MY recent valuable experience with poultry having taught me how to wrestle successfully with an egg famine, I next proceeded to the more complex and at the same time more interesting problems of hatching and raising young chickens. After our appetite for eggs had been appeased, it seemed high time that some of those hens should be getting down to business in another fashion. It was late in the season; the early spring flowers had bloomed and faded; orchard trees were blossoming, birds singing and nest-building; and here were our feathered folk, wandering over hill and dale, chasing yellow butterflies and young grasshoppers, scratching up earthworms and garden seeds with cheerful zeal, talking and gossiping among themselves, evidently so in love with sunshine and freedom, that not one of them had the slightest notion of going into solitary confine-

From An Oregon Ranch

ment for three long, stupid weeks. It seemed just possible that they belonged to some biddies' club, were "new-era" dames, and had permanently retired from the hatching business; perhaps they were saying to each other, "If these carnivorous people want spring chickens, let them buy an incubator and hatch them. Let none look to us for early broilers—we are emancipated females."

One day I was out raking the yard when Tom, coming up the walk, said: "Brace yourself for painful news. This very day two hens belonging to those shameless Stanhopes were set—or sat—which would you say?"

Two fowls, dusting themselves under a rose bush near us, apparently overheard this talk; one of them sprang up and really did seem to say, quite sharply, "What's that?"

"I said, madam," answered Tom, "that the Stanhopes have two hens set; and I ask, 'Why stand ye here all the day idle?' You are a Plymouth dame, and should have the Plymouth conscience."

This speech aroused the ire of the recumbent Susan Nipper, who scrambled to her feet and began a furious scratching, indignantly hurling dead leaves and gravel toward the speaker, who said in retaliation, "As for you, Mistress Nipper, the guillotine will get you if you don't watch out!"

Whether or not our hens were influenced by this talk will probably never be definitely known, but a

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couple of weeks later the setting craze broke out among them, raging as fiercely as the Egyptian plague. Clucking hens were everywhere, some setting in the most ludicrous places, others in their proper boxes, often two and sometimes even three on the same nest. The non-setters persisted in depositing their eggs with the setters, which resulted in noisy vituperations, with scratchings from sharp claws and jabbings from vicious beaks. At this the chanticleers, under pretense of stilling the tempest, but secretly glad of the racket and of the chance to show off their oratorical gifts, would begin a terrific harangue, which often terminated in a combat between themselves. The tumult and confusion were like a madhouse.

Meanwhile the demand for eggs grew strenuous. We could not get half enough to supply the emergency call. Everywhere were hens setting on nothing. One in the woodhouse, with imbecile credulity, was placidly brooding a broken doorknob. I have often heard the remark, "No more sense than a setting hen;" now I see the force of it. Out of pity for their needs, I urged Tom to "take to the hills" for supplies. Busy with other work, he was not eager for such an outing.

"But, Tom," I insisted, "my prophetic soul warns me that this is the tide in our affairs, which taken at the flood will lead on to fortune."

"And my prophetic soul warns me that you are a

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false Cassandra and a persistent one; but if you will bring me that detestable basket, I'll go and see what I can do."

Soon I had the satisfaction of seeing him jog away on his quiet old Rosinante, in quest of the golden nest eggs of our future fortune. Returning about dark with a full basket, obtained with difficulty from various sources, he hastened to visit the home of each feathered recluse and furnish it with supplies; after which this good Samaritan sank in exhaustion upon a convenient log, and, fanning himself with his hat, declared that he could have passed through the horrors of the French Revolution with less physical and mental wear and tear than he had suffered with this siege of "settin' hens."

I sometimes think Thomas is given to exaggeration, especially when fatigued.

This was only the beginning of trouble. Two obstinate hens were holding the fort in one barrel; neither would give up. With great sagacity, as I thought, I advised putting another barrel there with a nest in it, and the removal of Miss Flite thereto. "You know, her brain is a little muddled," I added, "and she won't know one barrel from the other."

"Don't fool yourself!" was the ominous reply, as my plans were being executed.

The next morning he came in, saying, "Just as I expected! Both those hens are again on the same nest."

From An Oregon Ranch

After due deliberation, the oracle thought it quite probable that Miss Flite was the original owner of the nest, and was holding it by right of discovery.

"Why not try Mrs. Pardiggle on the other?"

"It's no use, she won't stay; but I'll chuck her in."

And he was right; she would have none of it, but flounced out in high dudgeon as often as put in. Tom then fell back on "common sense" and his mythical experience at "Uncle Jim's," placing a partition in the barrel with a nest on each side of it — an arrangement which seemed satisfactory to both parties. All went well for about a week, when it was found that the straw had sunk below the partition, and, the avoirdupois of Mrs. Pardiggle being the greater, the eggs had all rolled into her nest. She was sitting on twenty-six, while poor Miss Flite had none; but as the latter seemed blissfully unconscious of any deficit, while the former, owing to her voluminous foliage, could easily cover all the eggs, we thought it best to leave their tranquillity undisturbed.

Thirteen chickens were the result of this co-operative incubation. Tom happened to be at the barn when the triumphant Pardiggle, with loud maternal cluckings, sailed out of it with the entire brood of fledglings at her heels. It seemed to him that a light suddenly shone in upon the befogged intellect of Miss Flite; for, screaming maniacally, she dashed from her compartment and flew into the midst of

From An Oregon Ranch

the brood, making frantic efforts to secure a fair division of the spoils.

"I hope you gave her some of them," I said to Tom when he had finished his narration.

"Yes, six; though feeling that I was foolishly sentimental in doing it."

"No, Tom, it was right and just — a merited reward for twenty-one days of inefficient faithfulness."

I am grieved to relate that Mrs. P., with unscrupulous pertinacity, through bribes and blandishments, lured all those chickens back except two, which Miss Flite continued "to have and to hold" until they grew into a beautiful and independent young pullethood.

If it surprises you that our mania for names is carried into poultrydom, just observe fowls closely for a time, and you will discover that not only are they possessed of marked individuality, but also of many of the characteristics of people you have known. For instance, a dapper glossy black hen had a topknot like a high silk hat, and grotesquely long wing feathers resembling a frock coat, which gave her such a look of masquerading in male attire that "Dr. Mary Walker" seemed the only possible name for her. "The Doctor" is an impulsive, self-willed creature. Observing her friends going, one by one, "into the silence," she apparently reasoned that the social whirl was over, that it would probably be dull in the yard for a time, and so concluded

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to go into the setting business herself. Looking the quarters over, she found a desirable flat; and though the rooms were all taken, she arrogantly ousted a timid, dark-complexioned tenant of Spanish descent, taking immediate possession of her home, her goods and chattels. The evicted one hung about her old home, lamenting bitterly; and though frequent efforts were made to reinstate her, all were futile. No matter how often or how violent "The Doctor's" removal, an hour later she would be found back in the same place. Losing patience at last, Tom said in disgust: "Well, stay there, then, you confounded old trespasser! You look ridiculous enough, perched up there, with your hat on and your coat-tails hanging over that box. You have just taken this up as a fad, and you'll mighty soon be sick of it."

If "The Doctor" heard, she made no sign, but continued to gaze steadfastly toward the Pacific Ocean, and never turned a feather. Having won the battle, she settled down to business in a resolute way; and we thought that perhaps, after all, she wasn't so flighty as she looked.

A week later Tom said, "You can't guess whom I saw in the woods today."

"Robin Hood?"

"No."

"Friar Tuck?"

"No; one more guess and you're out."

From An Oregon Ranch

After deep thought I hazarded, "Countess Irma and her little wood-carver."

"Oh, you're away off! It was Dr. Mary Walker."

"Good gracious! What was she doing away up there?"

"Sauntering along the brook, with a gay bevy of friends, picking up pebbles and grasses, seemingly quite care-free and joyous."

After this she was seen every day stalking over the fields. Great was our surprise when we found she really had hatched seven chickens. But having hatched them, she apparently didn't want them, or know what to do with them. She just stood in a far corner of the coop and eyed them gloomily, making no effort to feed, amuse, or instruct them. She evidently never told them a word about hawks, and the very first day they were allowed to go out for exercise two were carried off, and the next day another; the following morning she came straight to the house with the remaining four, threw them on my hands, walked off among the tall ferns, and never came back to them. The little dew-bedraggled things stood in a shivering huddle, peeping for their mother, until my nerves could no longer endure it. I brought them in, fed, and wrapped them up warmly; but still came those anxious cries, shrill and incessant. Then I remembered that Thoreau says, "Little chickens taken from the hen and put in

From An Oregon Ranch

a basket of cotton will often peep till they die; but if you will put in a book, or anything heavy, which will press down the cotton and feel like the hen, they will go to sleep directly." Looking around for a weight that would "feel like the hen," an inspiration seized me. I took the fluffy feather duster, warmed it slightly, and placed it over them, and was instantly rewarded by hearing a soft, gentle twittering—"the low beginnings of content," which soon ended in perfect quiet. In the hush that followed, I blessed the "Recluse of Walden" for the happy hint which had floated to me across the years.

After that, whenever an ailing chicken was brought to me for treatment, I usually clapped the duster over it and let nature take its course. Sometimes, it is true, when I lifted the duster to take a look at the patient, the patient was dead; but then it was quiet, and that's something. I feel a great pride in being the discoverer of the feather-duster mother, and am quite sure that no other poultry preserve in the United States has as yet realized its possibilities.

That evening I advised Tom to look around for "Dr. Mary Walker," as I feared she had met with some mishap. Returning later, he said: "Your fears were groundless. When I closed the door of the chicken house, I glanced over the inmates, and, lo and behold, in the front row of the dress circle sat her Majesty 'wrapped in the solitude of her own originality.' She seemed quite at peace with herself

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and the world. If she had been on the ground floor, I believe I would have slapped her."

It proved to be a clear case of desertion; finding the duties of motherhood irksome, she had shaken them off, leaving her children to me to bring up, as Mrs. Joe Gargery brought up Pip, "by hand."





XIII

ABOUT the time our poultry colony was fairly established in the "settin'" business, a smiling little sheep herder of the hills handed me a note from Mary. It was certainly unique—a sheet of pale gray notepaper daintily folded, and pinned together by a white feather crossing it diagonally. Fastened near the top of the inside page was a picture of a row of cunning little chickens just merging from the shell, cut perhaps from some advertisement; and just beneath the following poetic outburst:

"To the Hermitage hasten to tea,
And delay not to fix,
You're wanted just for to see
Our brand-new chicks."

"How humiliating, with ours still in the shell!" said Tom. "We started neck and neck in this race,

From An Oregon Ranch

and they beat us with eggs, and now come under the wire two weeks ahead with young chickens. No wonder they have 'dropped into poetry'—though that second line does seem a bit superfluous, don't you think?"

"Yes; they must have needed a rhyme for 'chicks,' as they well know that to 'fix' is with us a lost art."

"Thank heaven it is!" fervently responded the gentleman, turning down the hem of his overalls as a slight concession to the usages of polite society. The housekeeper, noting the half-pint of oats which rolled out on the floor, was calmly ignored, as in his best circus tones he announced himself ready "for the great, free, moral, and spectacular exhibition of the recently incubated." A half-hour later, in comfortable *negligée*, we were seated at the social board of our successful competitors in the poultry art.

What topics, think you, are discussed "over the tea cups" in the hills? Dinner parties, luncheons, receptions, last night's drama? Not at all; nothing so giddy as that. Nor do we discourse of art, music, literature, and such hackneyed themes. No; the agricultural mind soars not so far above the soil. The flow of soul usually begins with chickens and eggs; the subject of butter is then tactfully brought forward, which naturally suggests cows; cows suggesting pasture, it is then but a step to crops in gen-

From An Oregon Ranch

eral and "vetch" in particular. Lives there a man with soul so dead that he does not expatiate upon the wonderful properties of "vetch"? If such there be, he is not a resident of the hill country. Until we came here, I had never heard the word spoken; and now these new landed proprietors talk of it from the rising to the setting of the sun.

On the evening of which I write, the talk began, as usual, with fowls, dwelling chiefly upon the idiosyncrasies of the setting hen. We spoke of her illogical persistence and her general absurdities. Especially did we deplore her combativeness, Bert holding up a pair of battle-scarred hands as proof that his recent triumphs had not been wholly free from sanguinary features. Presently he went out and gathered a hatful of his "brand-new chicks"—fluffy, velvety little balls of yellow and black, soft grays, and creamy browns. The exhibitor remarked boastfully, "This is only a small line of samples. I have in stock twenty-five of these valuable birds."

"And they are all right for a starter," said Tom, patronizingly, "but if you will drop in at the Pointed Fir Hatchery in a couple of weeks, we will show you about twenty-five hundred of them."

I grieve to note the habit of exaggeration growing upon Thomas. Possibly two hundred were hatched, but to raise them after hatching—ay, there's the rub. Watchful sparrow hawks swooped down upon them by day; at night bloodthirsty

From An Oregon Ranch

prowlers of the forest crept stealthily forth to claim their share; of the survivors, many suffered from disease, not only the newly fledged, but quite a number of the older ones, which were what Tom called a lot of "scrubs." These were bought, during the rainy season, of accessible and accommodating ranchmen, who naturally did not part with their best.

Finding Tom one day gravely stirring some sort of mixture on the stove, I asked, "What in the world is that?"

"This, madam, is lard and cayenne pepper—a dose designed for a sick hen."

"How do you know she is sick?"

"If you saw a hen moping around, humped up like this, and catching her breath so"—graphically illustrating—"you would conclude that she wasn't enjoying the best of health, wouldn't you?"

"I'd think she had the blues, at least. What does ail her?"

"That I can't tell you."

"Who suggested that mixture?"

"This mixture was used with unparalleled success at my Uncle Jim's."

"Oh! As a remedy for what?"

"Don't ask so many questions. I don't know what it was given for, and I don't care; it's the only chicken remedy I wot of, and when one of ours seems indisposed she's going to get a dose of it."

From An Oregon Ranch

With this defiant declaration the gentleman went out to visit his patient, while I looked up a bulletin on poultry from our agricultural college. I was appalled to learn of the diseases chicken flesh is heir to. It seemed that if we succeeded in saving even one, it would be as a brand snatched from the burning. In my pursuit of information I had just stumbled upon a poser as the doctor returned.

"Tom, has a hen a nose?"

"Heavens, Katharine! how should I know? Not a noticeable one, I guess; at least, not one that she can turn up. Why?"

"Because this book speaks of a hen's nostrils, which implies a nose, don't you think? It says sometimes a slight incrustation forms over them, which should be gently removed by their caretaker."

"Yes—well, I can tell you right now that it will be an exceedingly frigid day when *this* caretaker gently removes it."

Oh, it is so wearing, this trying to instil scientific knowledge into the mind of one who absorbs so little! Sustained, however, by an earnest desire for his enlightenment, I began again timidly—

"If this patient of yours should happen to be suffering from lung trouble, you should give her a soothing drink."

"Soothing fiddlesticks!"

"I thought you approved of the teachings of the agricultural college?"

From An Oregon Ranch

“Well, isn’t warm melted lard a soothing drink?”

“I have never tried it as a beverage, but with cayenne pepper added, it might, I should think, ex-coriate even the well-seasoned throat of the terrible Mrs. Quilp. Didn’t it strangle her?”

“It did, Katharine; but it also aroused her from her apathy—and that is a point gained.”

To my surprise, after taking a few doses that fowl really did regain her health and spirits. During the summer the invigorating cordial was frequently administered, with varying results. Patients with strong constitutions survived it, others died; but the doctor’s faith in the efficacy of the remedy remained unshaken.

He had several baffling cases; for instance, there was a hen that looked perfectly well and ate ravenously. When wheat was thrown out, she would start for it on the run, but would soon begin to wobble like an exhausted top, and would fall over, perhaps several times, before reaching the goal, often landing there on her back, when she would turn on her side and gobble wheat as deftly as the well ones. She was soon placed in a private sanitarium, and her meals were carried to her until death came to her relief. I pronounced this case epilepsy; though Tom said it was a clear case of locomotor ataxia, and that not even the wise ones of the agricultural college could have saved her.

We had one frightfully small chicken with an ab-

From An Oregon Ranch

normally large head; it could walk a very little in a stiff and awful way, but couldn't stand at all and maintain its equilibrium, except with its feet very wide apart and its bill poked in the ground as an extra brace. In this case the physician's diagnosis was "dropsy of the brain." It did look like it. As the bantling couldn't keep within even hailing distance of its mother, it was brought to the house for the rest cure. Here it was never at ease unless it could find a crevice of the kitchen floor and insert its bill in it; then with closed eyes it would stand very still for many minutes, a painful and gruesome looking object. Very often the professional gaze turned thoughtfully toward it, and I well knew the gentleman was wondering whether or not the malady could be reached by lard and pepper. I was glad when kindly death interposed and saved the poor little sufferer from Graham's Great Elixir.

During the summer Tom, not being quite satisfied with "scrubs," bought some better chickens. Among them was one which caused him great trouble for a time. It was a fine thoroughbred Plymouth Rock, called by his former owner "Captain Jack." The Captain, for some reason known only to himself, objected to the early hours kept by our mountain flock, and firmly refused to enter the dormitory with them at sunset. It may have been that he had an affair of honor arranged with some hostile member of an outlying camp; or, being town bred, he may

From An Oregon Ranch

have been waiting for curfew to ring. Of course we could only guess at the motives which prompted his erratic conduct. But we did know that if he were left at large he would surely fall a victim to some lynx-eyed assassin of the hills; consequently Tom had to stay with him until he voluntarily walked into the chicken house.

"Let him go in when he gets ready," I suggested, "and close the door later."

"He would never get ready, Katharine; he would hide away in some tree, and that would be the end of his earthly career. You must not forget that he cost me three big silver dollars."

It was a solemn and impressive spectacle as seen in the gloaming—those two weird shadowy figures moving slowly and silently through the tall weeds and dog's fennel, the Captain a few paces in advance, showing no perturbation, though well he knew "a frightful fiend did close behind him tread." Occasionally he would pause to snatch a belated bug or an unwary grasshopper, or with assumed nonchalance stop before some little bush, scratch about its roots, then stand on tiptoe, and examine each leaf as carefully as if he were engaged in the study of botany. All this time Tom, with the same affected carelessness, would be sauntering near, pausing as the Captain paused, just as if he were taking an evening stroll and had by the merest accident fallen in with the military gentleman, but

From An Oregon Ranch

always keeping on the off-side and unobtrusively guiding the wanderer's steps bedward. When at last the wayward one entered the building, the door would bang behind him with such force as to shake the whole crazy structure. These evening rambles were continued for a couple of weeks, when suddenly it seemed to dawn upon the Captain that sunset was practically the sounding of "taps," in the hills, whereupon he turned in with the others, and gave his guardian no further trouble.





XIV

THIS, Nell, is the loveliest of May mornings, the sky as blue as a robin's egg.

“There's a rustle of leaves in the tall
forest trees,
And the brook sings a lullaby sweet.”

For two hours I have been at work in the garden, weeding onion, radish, and lettuce beds. Though this sounds prosaic, it was really idyllic. I had started upon my errand with but little enthusiasm, being tired from churning—eighty revolutions per minute—but after my first glimpse of the glory of the orchard I couldn't hurry fast enough to that bower of pink-and-white beauty lying on the sunlit hillside in all the dewy freshness of the early morning. As I reached it, it seemed to me nothing in the wide world could be sweeter. The air, so soft and pure, was filled with the delicate perfume of pear,

From An Oregon Ranch

plum, and apple blossoms; shadow and shine rippled through the tall grass; swaying upon and flashing through the flowery branches were plump robins with satiny vests of orange, the bluest of bluejays with drum-major topknots, and a shining host of wild canaries. A big pear tree seemed alive and fluttering with these canaries—little shimmering knots of gold among the white blossoms. They came here in swarms last spring, though earlier, when the peach trees were blooming. I remember that Tom called me to come out and see a “yellow peach tree.” He thought there were a hundred or more birds on one tree.

Such a flurry, flutter, and twitter as there was up among those pink blossoms! Such a multitude of little yellow birds we had never before seen. We were as excited as two children. They stayed but a day or two in such numbers, though many remained throughout the summer.

I suppose this is another party of tourists stopping over with us today, thinking they have reached Paradise; and it is little wonder, for it is like it.

I too longed to stay there “and just be glad,” but the vegetables were calling me from below to hurry along and deliver them from the deadly snares of their enemies—the coiling snake grass, wire grass, smartweed, dog’s fennel, and all their myriad foes. Reluctantly leaving the flowery kingdom, with glittering blade of steel I walked down into the valley

From An Oregon Ranch

of distress and began dealing death and destruction right and left. Yet even as I did it I felt a kind of pity for the innocent little trespassers.

I wish you could see this dear old ranch garden — so quiet and secluded, hedged about by green growing wild things, like a lonely little island. Across one side is an old paling fence, at least so tradition tells us, for if it still is there it is lost to sight and serves only as a support for vines and brambles. There the blackberry trails its flowery sprays, and the wild gourd runs like a creature alive, holding up its slender stems of green, tipped with fragrant starry white blossoms, such as we never saw until we came to Oregon. The farmers call it a pest; if so, it is a most bewitching one. Here too are hazel bushes — not like ours, but small trees; and wild rose and salmon bushes. The latter I am quite sure you have never seen. Their blossoms are beautiful, like pink hollyhocks in miniature. The humming birds love them; two burnished beauties were hovering above them when I entered the garden — different from any we have before seen, making the queerest roaring sounds, not unlike those of a wild animal. You won't believe this, nor did I until I had traced the incongruous sounds to them. It seemed preposterous to suppose that such dainty bits of iridescence would roar like that; but they did, for I caught them in the very act.

Alders and willows grow about my Eden, and wild

From An Oregon Ranch

plum and crab apple trees are snowy with bloom and faintly sweet; underneath these is a tangle of low bushes, wild flowers, tall weeds, and vines. Through this wall of green came a pleasant sound of bubbling waters, gushing from the roots of a group of alders just above me, a pure little rill of it sliding down the hillside, under bending briers, tall grasses, and nodding rushes.

Who wouldn't enjoy weeding in such a glorified nook, hearing the music of rustling leaves, falling waters, and a chorus of bird voices, a "choir invisible" hidden away in those green temples!

In the early morning the birds seem almost deliriously happy, singing with a "fine, careless rapture," as if from mere joy of living. In the evening their notes, though very sweet, are more subdued and plaintive, just hinting of unrest. Is it from weariness or is it anxiety? Whatever the cause, it is too elusive to be interpreted by my dull senses.

I am ashamed that I know so little about birds, not even the names of half that we see here; and yet I love them beyond rubies and pearls.

As I crouched there, working, and thinking of these things, I suddenly heard a familiar bird voice, and looking up I saw perched upon a curving willow wand a little wood wren that comes many times each day to the porch for crumbs. If I am not in sight, he lights on the railing and calls persistently until I appear. He has become quite fearless, hopping so near

From An Oregon Ranch

that I could reach him with my hand. A most lovable bird is little "Hop o' My Thumb," as Tom calls him. He introduced himself to us early last winter, and now we are intimate friends.

After a time I found the sun was shining down hot, and I was glad when the last of the onions were freed from their tormentors. They stood in long straight ranks, like little soldiers, and I think they saluted me as a conquering hero. I glanced at the parsley bed, and could see the little crinkly newcomers looking up through dog's fennel, gasping for breath; but so was I, and hence had to ignore their mute appeal. While I know of no more fascinating work than weeding a garden, the stooping position makes it hard. If the beds were only placed up high, like counters, with light rattan seats running round them, the work would be ideal. I'll have that kind some day, when my long-overdue ship sails into the harbor. To rest and escape the heat, I recrossed the raging Tiber, went again up in the orchard, sat down under an apple tree, threw off my sunbonnet and with it "the cares that infest the day," and gave myself up to the spell of that world of bloom and beauty.

"The blossoms drifted at my feet,
The orchard birds sang clear ;"

and softly now, in the later morning, their notes blended deliciously with the low murmur of leaves,

From An Oregon Ranch

rippling waters, and the faint tinkling of sheep bells down the leafy lane. The grass all about me was thickly studded with wild flowers; everywhere little tongues of flame were darting up through the green, from some queer plant new to me; patches of tall buttercups were waving in the sunshine like cloth of gold; white honeysuckles and purple and lavender fleurs-de-lis were all about me. Above them was a canopy of pink and white; around were the mighty hills spiked with the eternal green of the jagged fir trees, and over all was the arching blue of heaven.

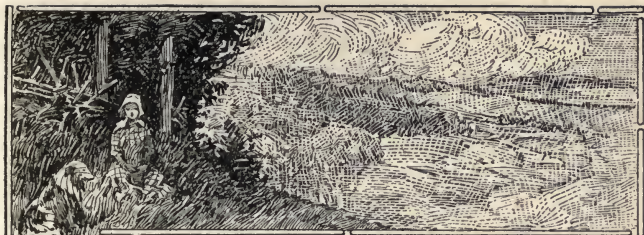
Into my heart stole that peace which passeth understanding, with a tide of thanksgiving toward the all-loving Father, who gives to his poor tired children such glimpses of glory and beauty as they travel the long briery road stretching out from life's dawn to life's dusk. Then I pitied all the denizens of great cities imprisoned in brick and stone, so far away from these blessed hills of Oregon, where there's "room to turn round in, to breathe, and be free." At such times the world seems remote and unreal. No sound from it pierces our leafy barricade. No clanging bells, no whistles, no shrieking engines, no brass bands nor throbbing drums, invade this sweet peacefulness.

We grow almost conceited, living in this vast solitude, half believing that we are the only inhabitants of the earth, that the machinery of the universe is kept oiled and running just for us—until the mail

From An Oregon Ranch

arrives, sometimes once a week, but oftener once in two weeks; then, as we unfurl the manifold pages of the metropolitan papers, we learn that there are others — that the classes and the masses are still going up and down the world, toiling and suffering and dying. I suppose that when we received a daily mail this sort of thing came in smaller doses, and we became hardened to it; but coming now *en masse*, as it does, the whole flood of it poured upon us at once, it is depressing and awful, the gruesome stories echoing sadly through our hearts even in this far-off lotus land “in which it seems always afternoon.”





XV

THIS is a breathlessly hot day in early June, and I am all alone in the deep fir forest, the others having gone "to town" for supplies—even Mary, who likes to take an occasional peep over the rim of this big green bowl in which we dwell, to see the people outside, note the style of their hats and gowns, watch the "cars come in," hear the engines whistle, and all that sort of thing. She begged me to go, but I, thinking of the long dusty road, especially that portion of it winding above those dizzy and dangerous canyons, felt that I would rather stay in my little old box-house under the cool shadows of the pointed firs. Once in a while I enjoy being quite alone for a whole day. It must be the hermit strain in my blood, inherited from dead and gone ancestors, who probably ate roots and herbs, dressed in skins, and lived in caves.

From An Oregon Ranch

The travelers set out for the giddy world just at sunrise, and as I stood at the gate to see them off, Mary looked at me quite sorrowfully, and Tom said, "You have a long day before you, Katharine; what will you do when we are gone?"

"Do? Nothing at all, sir; I shall wander about at my own sweet will —

‘As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.’

This promises to be one of the best days of my life."

"You'll not be quite so gay, my lady, when night swoops down on you in this spook-haunted woodland."

"Night swoops up, not down, in the hills, Thomas, and there are no spooks in this enchanted wilderness."

"Good-bye!" Bert called out as they started. "Don't get desperate and hang yourself in a fir tree while we are away!"

I watched them driving down the leafy lane until a bend in the road was reached, when Mary looked back; then —

"A hand like a whitewood blossom
She lifted, and waved, and passed."

I can't help smiling at this conceit, for Mary's hands and my own, after a year and more of ranch life, are

From An Oregon Ranch

in texture and color hardly like whitewood blossoms, to say the least.

The forsaken house looked very quiet as I turned back to the walk leading to the door. That walk, which when we arrived here in the cold drizzle of a winter evening seemed only a narrow muddy gulch fringed with dead bushes, surprised and gladdened us, when spring came, by the wealth of bloom which leaped to light along its borders.

This is quite an old ranch, one that has had many different owners, some of whom must have been real flower lovers. Wherever they are today, I wish this rose-scented breeze might carry to them our grateful benedictions.

Of late years the place was often without a tenant. At such times, we are told, the sheep and goats of neighboring ranches roamed over it at will, leaving destruction in their wake; that any plant life survived their ravages seems strange, and yet we were constantly being surprised by some old-timer struggling through the sod. Bert made the first discovery, and we all hurried to see the circle of little sharp bayonets piercing the earth, which a few weeks later, by their green ribbons and yellow frowsy heads, proclaimed themselves daffodils. These gave us hope of more to follow, and after that we fairly haunted the margin of that walk; presently our vigilance was rewarded by seeing delicate pink fingers pushing aside the matted grass and clover, in an effort to gain

From An Oregon Ranch

the sunlight and startle newcomers by the colossal size and beauty of the Oregon peony. Soon followed the tall queenly iris, gowned in white, yellow, and pale blue; then came snowballs and lovely jonquils, with the spicy clove pink, fragrant with the precious memories of my dear mother's old-time flower garden.

June showered upon us the most exquisite roses — soft delicate pink ones, like a "bride full of blushes," and pure white, with the mossiest of buds and stems; big velvety crimson ones, too, almost as fine as jacqueminots.

About this time we began to suspect that we had unwittingly become the possessors of another Vale of Cashmere, and would not have been greatly surprised by the sudden appearance of temples, grottos, and fountains in our estate.

Though these things did not materialize, there came a sudden rush of herbs — anise, dill, thyme, summer savory, and sweet basil, in company with that venerable plant known as "old man," which I am sure you must have met in childhood.

One day I heard Tom exclaim, "Hello, my old-time friend! I thought you belonged in this clique; I've been looking for you these many days. Katharine, did you ever see any 'live forever'?"

"Yes, plenty of it — about the time the morning stars first sang together."

"Well, do come and see this! It looks just as it

From An Oregon Ranch

did a hundred years ago. Dear me! how it does bring back my summer at Uncle Jim's!"

"Did they have it there?" I inadvertently asked.

"Did they? Well, I should say they did! My bare feet were always hot with stone bruises, which my aunt Sarah poulticed with these cool pulpy leaves; sometimes she put with them——"

Foreseeing a torrent of reminiscences, I hastily remarked, "We don't need poultices now; but the stuff looks nourishing—I wonder how it would do for greens?"

This happened in our starvation days.

"Let's try a dash at it, Katharine; the Chinese eat plantain, and this looks a mighty sight more fattening."

Our culinary works were reticent on the subject of "live forever"; otherwise, goaded on by hunger, I should probably have stewed a little just for sauce.

Sheltering this benefactor of bruised boyish feet was a very bushy tree, with a curious leaf, which we watched anxiously until early May, when it suddenly hung out hundreds of long drooping racemes, much like locust blooms, only of bright canary color. Flashing in the sunlight, it was like a shower of gold, and worth "coming miles to see." We now think it a Scotch laburnum.

Here, too, was the wreck of a honeysuckle, carefully staked about, hinting of something choice; but the omnivorous Angora (goat, not cat) had reached

From An Oregon Ranch

over the barricade and eaten it off almost to the ground. Tom dug about its roots, enriched the soil, and encouraged it with a trellis, which it gratefully climbed and now covers luxuriantly, though it has not yet seen fit to reward him with a blossom. Under one of the windows were the remains of an English ivy; given special treatment, today its dark glossy leaves cover the lower part of the house and peep inquisitively in at the window. Loitering along the walls, gathering roses, now blooming in perfection, all these things seemed very old-fashioned and sweet, lying so quietly under the soft shadows of the early morning. I realized to the full that—

“There’s no price set on the lavish summer,
June may be had by the poorest comer.”

If there were a price, an Oregon June in the hills would “come high,” I am sure, and that would bar us out. After filling the rose bowls, I went to the garden for white carnations; coming back through the tall grasses of the orchard, I gathered many strange varieties of the airy, fairy things, waving now in a slender vase near me, looking as fine and delicate as spun glass.

After the breakfast work was done, looking about for more worlds to conquer, I thought of the wild strawberries ripening on the hillside; a dish of them would pleasantly surprise the home-comers, and

From An Oregon Ranch

Sheila would be charmed by such an excursion. Sheila is our Scotch shepherd dog, given me a year ago by a genuine dog lover, a kind girl friend of the hills. When she came to us, she was a woolly little thing, like a soft fluffy ball of chenille; now she is a graceful, light-footed creature, with a small pointed head, and honest eyes of clear gray, just matching her coat; she looks the true-born patrician, and is one. Having no dog friends, she has to depend upon us for society, and we talk to her about everything, and rather think she understands. I said, "Sheila, would you like to go up on Mount Nebo?" She was on her feet in an instant, eyes dancing, plummy tail waving, as she took the basket in her white teeth and went proudly cavorting up the hillside. After reaching the delectable land and delivering the basket reluctantly, she hurried away to inspect various surrounding mole hills and gopher hills, entertaining, perhaps, a secret hope of scaring up a "Chiny," all of which was so wildly exciting that she had frequently to dash back and poke her little pointed face up in my sunbonnet, as much as to say, "Isn't this a high old time that we are having?"

The berries were plentiful, though very small. They lie so close to the ground that Bert always speaks of digging them. The filling of my basket was a work of time; when it was accomplished, that hillside was as hot as a fiery furnace. Gasping for breath, I hurried to the shade of a mighty fir — one

From An Oregon Ranch

that Tom calls the guardian of the ranch, as it stands not far from the summit of Mount Nebo. It was deliciously cool there, and as it seemed an agreeable place in which to perform a disagreeable task, I poured the berries out on the grass and began the tedious process of stemming them, under the watchful supervision of the gray huntress, who, wearying of the pursuit of the ever-vanishing "Chiny," had come up panting and thrown herself down to watch beside me.

It was glorious away up there, high above the work and worry of the world. Before me was that solemn crescent of dark green hills, towering so high that I sometimes think those topmost firs must brush against the walls of the unseen city. Half-way down, smoke, blue as the sea, curled up from the invisible cabin of a bachelor woodsman. "What can the man be cooking this hot day?" I asked myself. Far below lay the quiet glen dotted with trees and patches of waving grain—shade here, shine there; birds flying up and over, singing as they flew. Near us in the grass were tall wand-like lavender blossoms, with French pinks of many colors, and the white parasols of the wild parsnip bobbing everywhere; bees were lazily droning, and yellow butterflies drifting like rose petals through the air.

"Oh, Sheila, isn't it beautiful—this great round earth, that swings in the smile of God!" I cried to my companion.

From An Oregon Ranch

The plummy tail lashed the grass acquiescently. "I do wish that you could talk, Sheila," I added.

Then the wistful gray eyes looked up; the small pointed head lifted, tilted anxiously, trying so hard to understand that I hastened to say, "Never mind, my mute little Highland Princess; you are faithful and true, and far more companionable than many who can talk." Understanding the tone of approval, a hot little tongue forgivingly caressed my berry-stained hand.

So long did we linger in that cool retreat that I was horrified to hear the clock strike twelve as we entered the house. "Too bad! The half of my lovely day gone like a tale that is told," I cried remorsefully. Looking at the big black range, I thought, "Allah be praised! I don't have to fire you up and cook dinner." That alone was joy enough for a whole day—to be able to check off one meal from the 1095 of them looming up yearly before every servantless housekeeper. A slice of smooth cool curd, with a dash of nutmeg and powdered sugar, deluged with thick Jersey cream, made a luncheon good enough for royalty itself. My precious berries I saved to delight and refresh the wanderers on their return.



XVI

YOU must not think that ranch life consists chiefly of trout-fishing and strawberry-picking, with long intervals of rest under blossoming trees. Some friends—judging from their letters—seem to have an idea that living as we do in this out-of-the-way place, free from social duties, our days are days of elegant leisure, and life just one long holiday. Therefore, to prove to you that we are not being “carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease,” I must tell you something of the “demnition grind” of this new life.

Be it known, then, that here it is impossible to obtain house help even for a day—the few women living in the hills having more work in their own homes than they are able to do.

We were warned of this before coming up here, and were advised to be sure to bring with us a washing machine. I well remember that dreary purchase!

From An Oregon Ranch

Outside there was a drizzling rain; inside an interested salesman dragging from its dusty lair the ungainly monster, cheerfully extolling its many merits and possibilities—a panegyric lost upon one at least of his hearers, who, with a feeling of sadness almost akin to pain, looked at the ugly thing, standing on four straddling stilts, seeing only a succession of blue Mondays and gray skies through an atmosphere of steaming suds. Prospective wash days, however, held no terror for Tom; he rose to the occasion grandly, declaring with much animation that he believed he would rather like the novelty of the thing—that it would be his pride and pleasure “to make the wheels go round.” But after one or two experiences his enthusiasm drifted away like an ebbing tide; and I soon learned that if there was any one day upon which farm work pressed more heavily than another, that day was Monday; though the gentleman was always very sorry his own work was so crowding—hoping that the next Monday he would be “able to grasp the helm.” It seems strange, but even at this late day his work continues to “crowd” on Monday, though it always seems to ease up a little toward the middle of the week.

You will remember that the rainy season was on when we came here; consequently the drying of clothes was a problem, and to hang them on the line, stretched across a hillside as steep as the roof of a house, required the dexterity of a mountain climber.

From An Oregon Ranch

The ground, covered with soft decaying leaves, was as slippery as if soaped. To keep one's feet one must cling to the line with one hand while hanging clothes with the other; and very often they were still swinging there, dripping wet, when the next Monday dawned. I having written to a friend about these difficulties, she wrote back: "Make your laundry work light; put away your table linen, use plate doilies and paper napkins." Telling Mary of this advice, she said, "The lady has forgotten that we are agriculturists. Now just fancy these men, clad in blue jeans and cowhides, confronting a doily of Mexican drawn work!" It was rather absurd; but still the advice was not quite lost, and the result was that some of our long cloths were cut into luncheon cloths, exactly fitting the top of the table; with a wide hem on the four sides they looked reasonably well, and saved much labor. Emboldened by this success, the Japanese napkin was then introduced — not without protest, however, as Tom remarked, "I'd much prefer a paper bag to this thing!"

"You would find it harsh, Thomas, and rather unyielding," replied his determined spouse.

"Now isn't that a dandy affair for the use of a robust farmer?" he continued, holding out a hand with the delicate paper squeezed into a tight little wad that would scarcely have filled a thimble. It certainly did look small, but there was no relenting in the heart of the washerwoman.

From An Oregon Ranch

When we visited each other, linen napkins were brought forth — for custom's sake — though it was tacitly understood that they were not to be used, and we women never forgot. I have often been moved almost to tears to see how promptly and carefully Mary laid hers aside.

Sometimes one or the other of the men, forgetting the unwritten law, would shake out his napkin with the old-time flourish, whereupon his hostess was apt suddenly to lose her vivacity, becoming abstracted to the neglect of her duties. In spite of her best efforts, her eyes would fix themselves upon that square of linen, until the offender, hypnotized into consciousness of his breach of etiquette, refolded and laid it far beyond the reach of temptation. The feast over, behold Mary and me, with smiles "childlike and bland," "gathering our sheaves," still in their original folds, calmly speculating upon the length of time that, with care and vigilance, they might be safely withheld from the laundry. Free use of them was permitted, however, on holidays and anniversaries. It was really refreshing then to note the reckless abandon with which they were flung to the breeze. As all "habits gather by unseen degrees," Mary and I have now about persuaded ourselves that the use of linen napkins between the beginning of the rainy season and the singing of the bluebirds is really "bad form"!

While discussing our household problems, I must

From An Oregon Ranch

tell you about the care of milk, which is hardly the pleasant pastime once pictured by my imagination—such a never-ending straining, skimming, and washing of pails and cans!

Unfortunately we had bought cans much too large for our needs—which is only one among many of the mistakes of our inexperience. Having been told by the books that “deep setting” was desirable, we went in for it—and we’ve got it; the washing of one of these tall tin cans is like reaching into the depths of the great tun of Heidelberg.

There was no milk house on the place when we came, and no cellar—they seem not to have cellars in Oregon—and as the weather grew warm the milk soured, and the heart of Martha was troubled. After worrying along for a time, one morning Tom said, “I’ve an inspiration, Katharine! This day thou shalt behold a milk house!”

After several hours had passed I was called to come out and view the edifice. I sallied forth and found one of our largest packing boxes placed under the shade of a big alder, directly over the little spring rivulet, with a wooden trough inside, through which ran the water in which the cans were to stand. Half the top of the box was hinged to fold back; but as it was found that the mistress of the manse was unable to reach the cans, even when standing on a chair, the architect was obliged to hinge the upper half of one side to let down instead of lift up. Four poles driven

From An Oregon Ranch

into the ground supported an old porch awning which served as a canopy for this masterpiece.

Rather primitive it was, although, as Tom said, "It beats nothing." It truly did, and I was grateful for it—though not long before I had visions of a picturesque stone milk house, overgrown with English ivy, myself walking about in the cool interior, directing my dairy maids, somewhat after the manner of the vigorous Mrs. Poyser. When I have an errand at this sylvan shrine, I have only to walk across a long porch, go down three steps, descend a steep little hill, turn a sharp angle, and I am there. Then I lift up the altar cloth, pull hard a leather strap hooked over a nail, turn the side door down, fold back the upper one, reach in and drag out those monstrous cans, each dripping with water. The thing is not magnificent, but 't will serve; at any rate, it keeps our milk cool and sweet.

You perhaps have read that little story, "Twenty Miles from a Lemon." Now we are twenty miles from a loaf of bread, which is worse. One can live without lemons, but not without the staff of life; consequently one must bake, though the heavens fall, twice or three times each week. Furthermore, we have learned here that it will not do to buy the roasted and ground coffee, as at home; having to be bought in such large quantities, sufficient to last for weeks, it soon loses both its strength and its aroma. An old coffee mill nailed to the side of the wood-

From An Oregon Ranch

house conveyed to us the hint that people living so far from town usually ground their own coffee. Thereupon we bought a new mill and a supply of the green berry, which must be roasted twice each week and ground twice daily.

Having neither electricity nor gas lights, we had to fall back upon the fragrant kerosene; and dreary enough it seemed at first, Tom declaring a good healthy lightning bug would be quite as satisfactory. For a time the care of those lamps seemed a burden greater than I could bear, but now, though it has not fallen from me, and never will, I fear, I have become resigned to the task as a part of the price one must pay for the "freedom of the hills." And yet I do feel the revival of the coffee mill and the lamp as a retrogression.

While I am becoming accustomed to the absence of gas for illuminating purposes, I bitterly deplore the loss of my gas range; the heat of a monstrous wood range in summertime, in a kitchen blessed with but one window, is beyond description. I honestly believe that if one out searching for Hades should about the noon hour poke his head in my kitchen, he would instantly shout, "Eureka! Eureka!" and cease his quest.

This range, to be kept up to the mark of duty, when fed by the light dry fir wood used here, must be crammed unceasingly; it gulps down a half-dozen sticks in as many minutes and immediately sulks for

From An Oregon Ranch

more. To keep the pot boiling with such fuel requires eternal vigilance.

There is no cooling off here by drinking ice water, for, alas! there is no ice. While spring water is cold, one can't help longing for the tinkle of ice in the pitcher; and iceless lemonade is, as we have found to our sorrow, "flat, stale, and unprofitable." Ice cream and those refreshing water ices!—let me not speak of them, for "that way madness lies."

The other day I threw a big gunnysack over our old freezer, just as a veil to hide the past.

The lack of ice, of course, causes much extra work and trouble in caring for food. Until now I never half appreciated a refrigerator; but, as Tom says, "We never miss the water till the well runs dry." As our well is a spring, we hope we may be spared that calamity. This spring is near—just at the end of the kitchen porch—and yet the water for use must all be carried in. Less convenient, surely, than the turning of a faucet above the kitchen sink!

We have other trials and privations—and compensations also. At home the vegetables we use are brought us from the markets. Here we must ourselves go to the garden for them; this takes time, but I am always glad to go—glad to go anywhere, to escape the consuming breath of that life-destroying fiend of the kitchen. There, in the fruit-canning season, the fruit in cases and baskets is delivered at the door; here we must pick it from the trees—such

From An Oregon Ranch

delightful work that I can't even pretend to complain of it. Today, gathering rosy peach-plums under that tent of green leaves, I felt so insufferably proud that had the arrogant "Mrs. Lofty" passed by with her carriage and coachman, I could not but have smiled upon her disdainfully.

Unfortunately for me, Tom has recently learned in some way that corn bread is a nourishing food for young chickens (I knew it long ago—read it in a book—but kept still about it), and I have now to bake about a yard of it daily. As Mrs. Todgers, of boarding-house fame, said of the making of gravy for single gentlemen, "That one item has aged me ten years."

This tale of woe might be continued indefinitely, but enough has been said to show that our "leisure" is not really burdensome; that we are not quite all the time sitting with folded hands, "rapt in nameless reverie." And yet, in spite of the toil, the hardships, and the privations of this life, these Oregon scenes are so dear to me that I would not exchange this woodsy old ranch for the finest of city homes, with a retinue of servants and ten thousand a year thrown in. I am far happier here under these dark firs, with the wood pigeons and the owls, the fresh air, and the glorious freedom of the hills.



XVII

A BUSY time indeed we hill-dwellers have been having for the past six weeks! Such hurrying to and fro, such rushing in and out, such fetching and carrying, such toiling and moiling, as if the prosperity of the nation depended upon our individual activity—surely I never saw the like of it before.

What is it all about? Why, we've been a-harvesting, and a-gathering in the sheaves, and a-threshing of 'em; and I've been a-standing over that fiery dragon of a kitchen stove, canning fruit, making a bewildering confusion of jams, jellies, marmalades, and preserves, with sweet-pickling and sour-pickling and chili-saucing, and all the other evils flesh is heir to thrown in as a side issue; and I haven't had time to take a deep, full breath since the middle of August.

However, it was not of these things that I intended to write today; rather, of certain good fortune

From An Oregon Ranch

that has just come to me—and on wash day, too, when I never look for anything but sodden, suds-soaked misery.

Let me tell you, first, that this being forced to do one's own laundry work is the worst feature of ranch life. The shadow of the coming event actually darkens my Sundays, and by Monday morning I have generally reached the depths of gloom.

In this mood I remarked at breakfast, rather savagely, "I wish to goodness some Croesus would scatter some of his superfluous millions among poor and needy ranch folk! What's the sense of giving organs and libraries to people who don't want them, and of endowing universities that get mad about it and are ashamed of their origin?"

Thomas, recognizing the Monday morning madness, showed no surprise at this outburst, but placidly inquired, "Have you a specially crying need of wealth this morning? What do you want to buy?"

"Nothing—I want to build. If my esteemed friend Mr. Carnegie would favor me with, well, say this coffee pot full of twenty-dollar gold pieces, I'd proceed at once to erect a steam laundry, out of sight and sound of this house, away back in the canyon in its darkest, deepest depths; and I'd have a Chinaman to operate it, and Mr. Mantalini himself to preside over the mangle, and a big bandanna-browed lady of African descent to hand out the soiled linen to that Mongolian; and I'd have nothing at all to do

From An Oregon Ranch

with this unpleasant business until the clothes were returned, smooth and immaculate, in beautiful Indian baskets, each separate package wrapped in white tissue paper, ribbon-bound, with sprays of sword fern, wild lavender, and mountain laurel tucked in. That's what I'd do if I had the necessary wealth!"

"Great Scott! but you are soaring this morning, Katharine! Methinks e'en now I behold the opium-tinged gentleman from Hong Kong, in flowing Oriental robes, entering my suite of apartments, bearing an Injin tray of manzanita, upon which lie in state my dark blue overalls and my blue jumper, with one lone red bandanna glowing upon its pulseless breast, and these all swathed about with tissue paper and baby ribbon, a cute little wisp of golden rod tucked in the left hip pocket of my blue jeans. *Bon ami!* How absurd!"

"*Bon ami!*—I don't know what it means, and I doubt if you do."

"I don't, Katharine, but we've got to work up in the languages a little if we are going to have a household of foreign-born menials; they will be likely to act sort of uppish at times, then I'll roar at 'em in French, and I fancy it will be pretty scary."

"It certainly will be awesome—your kind of French. But do listen to that clock striking seven!"

"*Tempus fugit*—to continue my classic form of speech; and as your thought waves are not likely to reach the shekel-dispenser of Skibo in time to bring

From An Oregon Ranch

returns before next week, shall I rise and fill the wash boiler as of yore?"

"You may, if you please—as Chang Wang's barque seems to be detained by head winds."

While we were engaged in the task of gathering together the depressing laundry outfit, my assistant earnestly assured me that he "really would take a hand today"—as it was probably the last time the work would be done at the house—only that he was just compelled to put new sills under the cattle barn, as it was liable to tumble down any minute.

As the structure referred to has stood for about a quarter of a century, it seemed possible the crash might not have come today—and I believe I hinted as much, as I went about radiating sweetness and light.

Not long after this there might have been seen upon the back porch of the Ranch of the Pointed Firs a woman's waving shadow, bowing and bending low above a wash tub, the shadow muttering—

"For men must work, and women must weep,
And there's little to earn, and many to keep."

After an hour or more of hard work, I observed Thomas coming up from the ruins of Palmyra, and hoping to awaken a spark of compassion in his adamant bosom, I put on my most fagged expression, rubbing so fast and with such force that every loose

From An Oregon Ranch

thing on the porch was jingling when he reached it.

But, alas for my misplaced hopes! he passed me with a cheerful, "Lay on, Macduff!"

Then "the breaking waves dashed high," and the white foam flew, but the Madonna of the tubs spake no word.

He came for some tool, as nearly as I could judge without looking at him—which I disdained to do. When starting back, he halted to say, "A mighty tough time I'm having with that old shack. Casualties up to the present hour, one mashed thumb, two blood blisters on left hand, three fir splinters in right." Then he waited a little for some expression of sympathy; but nothing was heard on the porch but the hurrying hand of the wash lady.

Advancing by easy stages to the colored clothes, I found among them a pair of overalls—new ones, as stiff as buckram. In one pocket I discovered about half a pound of nails of various sizes, a coil of wire, a short piece of rope, and a leather shoestring; in another some plump grains of vetch and some large speckled beans, doubtless carried about to awaken envy in the hearts of neighboring farmers. The usual supply of oats and chaff was then shaken out, and the lightened garments were plunged in the tub, where, becoming inflated with hot air, they refused to down at my bidding—just fell upon their knees, looking so like their owner that I felt as if I were drowning him. Unmoved, I was jabbing them

From An Oregon Ranch

viciously with a stick, when a strange voice said, "Good-morning, ma'am!" I jumped, dropped the stick, and the blue jeans bobbed up like a jack-in-the box. Near me stood a perfect giant of a man with a flour sack on his shoulder, really the tallest man ever seen outside of a canvas.

"Are you Mrs. Graham?"

I thought of saying, "No; I'm Bridget McCarty; Mrs. Graham is at the sea shore." But before I could speak, the giant continued, "I've got some mail here for you," as he began untying the flour sack, the only form of mail bag used in the hills.

Now we had had no mail for over two weeks; and as I watched that towering angel in corduroy throwing out letters, magazines, papers, and packages, I could have fallen upon his neck in gratitude—if a convenient step ladder had been near me.

A pitcher of milk with a gingerbread accompaniment was offered, and graciously accepted by the giant. Declining a chair, he rested on the edge of a table, the Madonna on the wash bench, as we held a porch *conversazione*. I learned that he was living quite alone on a timber claim, "about four mile back in the mountains, mighty nigh the summit, and just about at the end of things."

"Ever feel lonely up there?" I ventured to inquire.

"Not a bit of it! I've lived in the woods since I was knee-high; I go to town about once in three

From An Oregon Ranch

months, and then I'm lonesome, uneasy as a fish out of water, just homesick for the big trees."

I recognized a kindred spirit. He then told me of his work—of making rails and posts, of splitting shingles and clapboards, of cooking, and of baking "sour-dough biscuit." I wondered what they were.

"And do you have to do this?" I asked, with a wave of my hand toward the tubs.

"Yes, about once a month."

"Don't you just hate it?"

"You bet I do!" (Another link forged in friendship's chain.) "But I make short work of it, slap 'em through in a hurry and throw 'em on the bushes to dry; and I never wash them things"—pointing to the suds-soaked effigy of Thomas, now slowly sinking into the waters of oblivion. "You see, mine get just plastered with pitch; water wouldn't even wet 'em. I wear 'em till things get to stickin' to me, then burn 'em."

I fancied him in his strange suit of armor, stalking about in the gloom of the forest, with feathers, ferns, pine needles, and cones sticking to him, giving him the look of some gigantic woodland satyr.

But the best of friends must part; his cart was soon climbing the long hills, and I gathering up the mail with the joy of Silas Marner gloating over the pot of gold hidden beneath his loom. I had resolved to keep it all intact until my work was done, and then enjoy it with a clear conscience; and I might have

From An Oregon Ranch

done so but for a mysterious package, very heavy and oblong, not unlike a gold brick, too tempting to be resisted. Eager fingers hurriedly removed the heavy outer wrapper, then a lighter one, then one of tissue paper, and there appeared the most beautiful book — fine paper, exquisite type, wide margins, and choice illustrations.

Thinking gratefully and lovingly of the generous giver of my precious book, and quite ashamed of the rebellious mood of the morning, I went back to my work with a light and happy heart. Something pleasant had happened to relieve the monotony of toil and change the current of my thought. Work was easy now, and soon those clothes were fluttering white upon the hillside. They were not slighted in the least, either; for I've learned of Emerson, corroborated by experience, that to feel "relieved and gay, one's work must be well done, otherwise it shall give one no peace; is a deliverance which does not deliver."

Dinner over, the work "done up," and every trace of the late unpleasantness removed, Bridget McCarty vanished from mortal view; Mrs. Graham emerged from seclusion, freshly if not modishly gowned, seated herself in a favorite rocker by a favorite window, drew another chair near upon which was piled that blessed mail, then glanced at the clock. It was three P. M. — two whole hours before time to begin supper.

From An Oregon Ranch

During those two hours I was about as near perfect content and happiness as I ever expect to be this side the gates of pearl. Absorbed in the delightful contents of six plump letters, the fascinations of a new book, and a multitude of papers and magazines, I was startled when the clock with cruel distinctness struck five. The sound fell upon my ear like the death knell of Duncan.

Now, if you think my pleasure in these things exaggerated, go and live for a year or two in the isolation of the woods, far away from public libraries and book stores; then let a surprise and pleasure like mine come into your life, and see if your head also would not be turned just a little.





XVIII

NOW that the "mellow autumn days"
have come, if you are longing for —

"Air and sunshine and blue sky,
The feeling of the breeze upon your
face,
The feeling of the turf beneath your feet,
And no walls but the far-off mountain tops,"

then come to my beloved Oregon hills. All for which you long is here; and far more, now that autumn is abroad in the land, standing tiptoe upon the hilltops, pouring down their slopes "from a beaker full of richest dyes" a flame that setteth the mountains on fire and maketh a new heaven and a new earth. Illustrated in colors, they seem not the hills we have known, but strangely unfamiliar in this shimmering radiance, this new witchery "from dreamland sent." There was a time when I was rather skeptical of the

From An Oregon Ranch

existence of a "beauty that intoxicates," but that was before coming to Oregon. I am a believer now, and already half inebriated through the charm of this latest revelation. For a long time I have been sitting on an old stump—one of the decorative features of our woodland lawn—looking over this wonderland and regretting the years lost in finding it.

For the first and only time in my life, I am happy and content in my environment. Of course there are some ugly old buildings that mar the picture—but you know that we are told to look up, not down; and looking up, they are quite forgotten. Such a sky as we have here today—blue as a harebell, and much the shape of one, its rim just resting upon this crown of dark firs; crawling up its western edge, a low line of white wreathing clouds, as if the sea, rolling high, were dashing its foam there. A luminous flood of sunshine is in the air, soft, caressing, and sweet with the aromatic breath of the fir trees; brooding over all is "Nature's own exceeding peace," a hush unusual even in this land of silence. I thought—as I often do here—of the stillness of Craigenputtoch, where "for hours the only sound is that of the sheep, nibbling the short grass a quarter of a mile away"; of Carlyle writing his mother: "These are the grayest and most silent days I ever saw. My broom, as I sweep up the withered leaves, might be heard at a furlong's distance." I always think of that place as the dreariest on earth. "The house, gaunt and hun-

From An Oregon Ranch

gry-looking, standing in its scanty fields like an island in a sea of morass, the landscape unredeemed either by grace or grandeur — mere undulating hills of grass and heather, with peat bogs in the hollows." What a home for the eager, ambitious, brilliant Jeannie Welsh Carlyle! Away from all the refinements of life, shut up in that gaunt, hungry-looking house on that treeless waste with that tragic man of genius — of terrible earnestness and blackest melancholy — is it any wonder that she lost her cheerfulness and vivacity?

Though we have here the solitude, thank goodness we have not the gray desolation of Craigenputtoch nor the gloom of a man of genius. The only sounds that come to me in this peaceful Eden are those of softly rippling invisible waters, the low murmur of insects, the occasional dropping of the tiny brown cones of the alders, and a faint rustle of falling leaves. Nothing more. Even the clamorous cricket is silent. Our birds have long been mute, and now "slide o'er the lustrous woodland," voiceless phantoms of the minstrels we once knew.

But we have a visitor who has brought his voice with him. He has but lately come to us, from out of the reeds and rushes of the lowlands — a meadow lark. Every morning comes floating up to us from this little glen a melody so divine that the angels above must fold their wings to listen. From childhood I have loved this bird above all others. His

From An Oregon Ranch

notes are inexpressibly mellow and sweet—tender, too, with a perplexing hint of sadness. Is it the pathos of reminiscence, of prophecy, or of passionate pleading? I try hard to understand, but cannot. I only know there is in it a cadence—

“That touches me with mystic gleams,
Like glimpses of forgotten dreams—
Of something felt, like something here;
Of something done, I know not where.”

Tears fill my eyes as I listen. I hope that “when I put out to sea” a flight of this divine melody may pilot me through the gray mists to that far-away shore where shine the lights of the heavenly harbor.

The—I was going to say lawn, but I won’t, for that word doesn’t fit this lumpy, bumpy, gopher-hilled ground; it is best, when you live in the woods, to put aside affectations; so henceforth and forever I shall say *dooryard*. The dooryard now has none of its June loveliness. While the grass is still green, it has lost its freshness through the drouth and heat of summer; and the wild flowers that once blossomed here are but a memory. A few clover blooms, in defiance of fate and frost, are trying bravely to hold up their heads, but they have lost the rosy glow of youth. All about me the dandelions are lifting high in air their gauzy white balloons. They are quite different from ours at home, which were low growers; and if one rashly attempted to cut down one of the

From An Oregon Ranch

white-headed veterans, his head fell off and blew away. Here they are nearly two feet high, and that hollow starry globe of lacework is a wonderful stayer. Nearly a month ago, tempted by the beauty of these delicate transparencies, I cut a few of the slender stems and stuck them in a pot of growing ferns, not expecting them to last more than a few hours; and here they are today, those fairy balloons just lifted above the green, fully inflated and tugging at their guy ropes.

The thistle family also is well represented here. Purple with bloom and white with down, the yard looks like a cotton field. I find the thistle rather interesting, now that I have left the vain world and its distractions and have time to look at it, with its long narrow leaf deeply notched and lance-tipped, its purple-stained paint brush blossom, its seed pod — such a pretty flaring cup of wood brown, thickly studded with sharp spikes and filled with tiny brown seeds all feathered and ready for flight. It seems a wonderful plant, and must be possessed of virtues still unknown to us, else why did Nature take such pains to protect and perpetuate it?

Holding up the brown cup, I blew gently across it, and oh, such a frenzy of excitement among those little feathery folk of thistle down! They leaped over the housetop, tumbled down the spiked walls, clinging frantically to one another in that brief moment of parting; then, disentangling themselves, floated

From An Oregon Ranch

upward, circling about an instant, took one last look at the little brown home, and one by one sailed away into the blue briery world. As the empty cup fell from my hand, I felt half sorry for those drifting airy voyagers.

When the cups have emptied their contents, they soon become round platters, each with a fringed lining of old ivory satin, in the center a tiny tufted couch of softest down. In such a cosy bed had nestled the little brown heads of my poor wanderers. Why need I have meddled with them?

Farmers may despise the thistle, but I'm sure the butterflies love it. Oh, the beauties I have seen this day—not the delicately tinted butterflies of summer, but living, glowing jewels, fluttering always above the thistles! One rested for a long time upon a purple bloom quite near me, opening and closing his exquisite wings of black and gold, sun-illumined, like dainty, gauzy Japanese fans.

I must go back and tell you of the beauty of that towering hill directly in front of us. It is really a mountain, I think, but here we call it a hill. We had quite forgotten the many maple trees growing upon its slopes, the green of their foliage in the summer-time being lost in that of the firs. Though we forgot, autumn remembered; and, grieved that her favorites should remain unrecognized in that monotony of green, she stole softly into the shadowy forest, traced up the lost Cinderellas, and then, with the gorgeous

From An Oregon Ranch

dyes of Turner and the brush of an impressionist, splashed all their broad leaves with that ineffable glory which is the distinctive badge of the maple family. Today, as I look up and see them standing on the heights, the rich blazonry of their armorial bearings flashing in the fair October sunlight, I say aloud, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

Such a blaze of beauty so near the sky seems passing strange to me coming from a level country, seems alien to this world, and I half believe it to be a celestial landslide. I look, and look, and am thrilled through every fiber of my being. I feel such excitement, buoyancy, exultation, I want to absorb it all, to catch the luminous picture with its wavering lights, its tremulous shadows, and fold it away in memory as a sort of sacred amulet, a charm to be brought from its hiding place when the dull days come, as come they must in every human life.

"Katharine! Oh, Katharine!"

That's Bert's voice. "I'm coming!" I answered, as, clambering down, I turned for one last lingering look at those banners of scarlet and gold floating across that field of green, like the passing of some royal old-time cavalcade, and I thought that if I should hear the blast of a trumpet or the notes of a bugle, see prancing steeds with gay trappings, and catch a glimpse of the plumed heads of lords and ladies, followed by glittering knights with shining

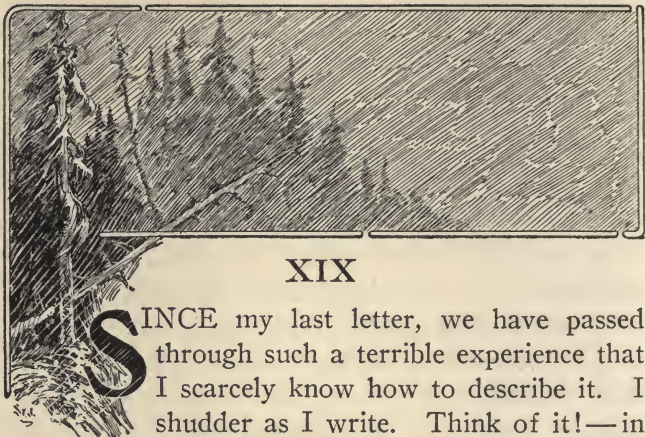
From An Oregon Ranch

shields and lances, I should feel no surprise, but think it fitting pageantry for this "land o' glamour," where —

"The splendor falls on castle walls
And snowy summits old in story;
The long light shakes across the lakes,
And the wild cataract leaps in glory."

I found Bert awaiting me with both hands full. Mary had sent a great bunch of magnificent chrysanthemums, all white and gold — the fluffy-headed kind, with curling petals. He brought, too, a branch of blood-red vine maple that he had broken off as he came through the woods, and some very curious lichens. And in this pleasant but effective way was cut short the thread of these autumnal rhapsodies.





XIX

SINCE my last letter, we have passed through such a terrible experience that I scarcely know how to describe it. I shudder as I write. Think of it!—in this quiet out-of-the-way place, where we felt so safe, so secure! Though this awful tragedy occurred three nights ago, my nerves are still quivering. I feel so weak and unstrung that I fear I cannot write calmly or coherently about it.

The wretched affair happened in the ball room—most incongruous of places! We find that entrance to the room was effected by way of the roof, which the intruder must have reached by climbing a large alder tree standing near the corner of the house. We now believe him to have been secreted there when we went to our beds. My blood runs cold when I think of it—but it dawns upon me that I am not telling this story in the right way. How do the re-

From An Oregon Ranch

porters manage these things? I believe the tragedy should have come later — that I should have led up to it more gradually, describing the events preceding it, the scene of the conflict, with a diagram of the room showing the position of each piece of furniture, the hole in the roof, and all that sort of thing. Now I'll have to begin again, I fear, and do it all over.

Soon after coming here, believing that our dancing days were over, we decided to reform the ball room by making a bedroom of it. By doing this we could reserve the only one below for a possible guest, and could ourselves have the pleasure of sleeping upstairs, where we could hear the rain falling upon the roof. "Much too good a thing to miss," Tom said, "in this land where the rain it raineth every day — and night, too — for six months at a stretch!"

How to get our furniture up that narrow perpendicular stairway was a problem. Fortunately, it was still crated, just as it had come from the far East. Bert and Mary volunteered their assistance; and finally, through much pushing, shoving, groaning, and some maledictions, the deed was done. Our ball room was transformed. Then Thomas had some dark hours there, removing tacks, nails, screws, boards, drugget, and excelsior, and putting the various pieces together, after which Katharine — she who has lived to tell the tale — brought her mighty talents to bear upon the situation, toiling for days trying to bring order out of chaos.

From An Oregon Ranch

I once gave you a description of the ball room, but perhaps you have forgotten it. The room is twenty feet wide and about a quarter of a mile long; side walls, rough, unplanned boards running up and down; no ceiling overhead, just the rafters and shingles — its spaciousness and beautiful smooth floor its only redeeming features. With two full chamber sets, and some extra furniture for which there was no room below, there was still left a vacant space of sufficient size for a couple of cotillions.

At one end of the apartment was a platform about a foot high for the use of the musicians in "the brave days of old." Upon this dais, feeling like one of royal birth, I placed my bedstead. Tom, upon beholding it, immediately dubbed my part of the room "Mrs. Boffin's Bower."

Suspecting spiders in the roof, we tacked large sheets to the rafters above each bed — canopies that added to the general effect; the one above the dais looked so grand that I felt a sort of awe of it myself. As a finishing touch, a few rugs were scattered over the floor. The decorative artist, turning to leave, paused in the doorway for a critical examination of the "altogether," and was forced to the conclusion that a bedroom in a barn would have been quite as attractive.

Up to this time it had been raining steadily, though gently, for days; but the morning my great work was completed it began pouring in torrents, growing

From An Oregon Ranch

worse toward evening, with a strong wind blowing straight from the ocean, something very unusual here.

When Tom had finished his evening work and was standing on the porch, shaking the rain from his storm coat, he called out, "A fine night for the Abbey, Katharine!"

"Yes, won't it be glorious?" I responded with enthusiasm. We were in high glee—couldn't wait for our regular bedtime, but put our books aside early, covered the embers in the old stone fireplace, lighted a hand lamp, and were ready for the ascension soon after eight o'clock.

Do you remember my telling you that one of the chief architectural oddities of this place was the lack of an entrance to the second floor from the inside of the house—the only door to the stairway being an outside one at the end of a long narrow porch? Tom, in advance of me, lamp in hand, opened the door of the dining room, gave a whistle of surprise, and began to sing—

"Come ferry me o'er, come ferry me o'er,
Over the river to Charlie."

"What's the matter, Tom?"

"Look and see!"

I looked, and beheld the darkness of a tomb. There was a torrent of rain and wind rushing

From An Oregon Ranch

through the wet fir trees, driving the flame of the lamp out of the chimney, smoking it black; the floor of the porch was all bumps and hollows—mostly hollows, each filled with water, gleaming in the lamplight.

“It’s hideous, Tom; we can’t make it!”

“We’ve got to make it! Faint heart ne’er won the second floor of anything. I’ll hold my hat over the light, you lock the door, then we’ll dash for our lives!”

It was no dash, I can tell you. We went tiptoeing and teetering across the sloppy links like a couple of prize cakewalkers. When at last the goal was reached, we looked at each other in speechless amazement. Such an uproar was never heard outside of bedlam. Accustomed to a plastered ceiling, with a garret above, this pounding of the rain upon a roof directly over our heads was positively deafening. It was not at all like rain—more like a downpour of rattling bullets or cobblestones. Through the open windows came the tumult from outside. Deer Leap, out of its banks, was roaring like Niagara; the wind was writhing and swishing through the fir boughs; the spring at the kitchen was a mighty cataract, throwing a big stream of water half-way across the porch.

Avoiding the eye of my fellow sufferer, I remarked indifferently, “Sort of boisterous, isn’t it?”

“It does seem a little so—just at first.”

From An Oregon Ranch

"Yes, I meant just at first."

Truly, we could scarcely hear each other's voices. After the lights were out, the turmoil and bluster were even more terrifying. The dampness of the room was something awful. After a while Tom shouted through the darkness, "Isn't it sweet, this gentle patter of the rain upon the roof?"

"Fine!" I shrieked; "so soothing—like a lullaby!"

"Oh, yes! And this Cataract of Lodore, too, just under a fellow's head, is a mighty nice thing! Tomorrow let's make us some megaphones."

As there was no hope of sleep, I fell a-thinking of the palmy days of this ball room, when, as we are told, the devotees of the dance came from twenty miles around to tread a gay measure here. I thought of the nail keg we found upon the dais, which had probably been used as a seat by one of the musicians, as an empty violin case was leaning against it.

It seemed a most fitting time for ghosts to walk. What if that long-ago violinist should come back tonight, and perching himself on the chair that had ousted his keg, suddenly begin "to plonk and plunk and plink, and to rosin up his bow," and should start up all the phantom belles and beaux of the shadowy past, and I should hear slippered and pumped feet sliding up and down the long room—should catch the scent of bergamot and patchouli and other old-time flavors?

From An Oregon Ranch

Just here I heard above the roar of the tempest: "Honors to your partners! Join hands and circle to the left! Balance all! Swing on the corners!"

"Goodness, Tom! are you crazy?"

"No, ma'am; it's just water on the brain, I think. But didn't you hear him—that old fiddler at the head of your bed, jerking off 'Old Dan Tucker,' and all the fellows skating across the room to secure their partners? Just to be friendly, I thought I'd call off for the spooks."

After a time the deluge ceased, and then the ball room became an ideal place for sleep. It was delightful to lie there, listening to softly falling rain, night winds sougning through the forest, owls hooting in the orchard—nature music as deliciously lulling to the senses as the "drowsy wine of poppies."

But the midnight adventure can no longer be postponed.

During the night I woke suddenly without any apparent cause, but with the sure consciousness of something being wrong, soon verified by the strangest of sounds, as if tiny soft hands were very gently patting time for unseen dancers—an awfully creepy sound in the dark. A little later came stealthy footsteps, nearer and nearer, seeming to approach the dais. Soon there was a rustling among some clothes hanging on the wall, quite near, as if they were being fumbled over. Flesh and blood could endure no more.

From An Oregon Ranch

"Tom! Tom! There's somebody in this room! Get a light, quick!"

"How foolish you are, Katharine! If you hear anything at all—which I doubt—it's only the squirrels running over the roof."

"Don't stop now to talk! Do hurry with the light!"

Reluctantly and with great deliberation he arose, muttering something about "idiocy" and "spells," and just as he struck a match, a horrible hairy creature bounded out of those clothes, leaped to the wall, and ran along a rafter to the comb of the roof.

"For heaven's sake, what was it, Tom?"

I secretly believed it to be a wildcat; it was such a monster, with the face of a fiend, eyes of fire, and waving a big bushy tail of a squirrel.

"I'd shoot him," Tom said, rather indifferently, "but my shotgun is in the barn, and just today I fired the last cartridge from my revolver."

"Get my rifle," I cried, swelling with pride. A friend visited us a year ago, a fine sportsman, who came with four guns, and when he left he gave me a lovely little rifle.

"Where is it?"

"Downstairs in the dining room."

"All right!" and off he started with the lamp.

"No, you don't—and leave me here in the dark with this hideous thing!"

"Such a coward!" but he gave up the lamp, and

From An Oregon Ranch

went blundering off in the darkness. After what seemed an age, he returned, remarking with some bravado, as he loaded up, "Now, my bold outlaw, your hour has come!"

I held the lamp; he fired. There was no effect whatever.

"I thought you said his hour had come!"

"It has — if he'll stay there long enough and the ammunition holds out."

Twice again he shot, and then the "thing" ran down a rafter and was hidden from us by the canopy above the dais.

At this the brave lady was encouraged to mount to the top of her bureau and try to locate him. With lamp in hand, she peered into the shadows.

"Wait! I'll fix him!"

Going into the next room, Tom came back armed with one of the parts of the quilting frame we found here when we came.

"Now, then, just about where is he?"

"Close against the side wall."

The quilting frame cut a wide swath of air, and struck — solid wood. Running straight up the rafter just over my head came the "thing" — a poor frightened rat!

"Now, Tom, you hold the light and I'll show you some Buffalo Bill marksmanship." Drawing my trusty rifle to my shoulder, I shut both eyes, and fired.

From An Oregon Ranch

“That was a hot shot, Katharine! — he must have winked his other eye at that!” He snatched the smoking weapon from my hand and fired again. The rat humped his back, waved his tail lazily, and looked down upon us so dreamily that I really thought he would be asleep in another minute.

“I guess we’ll lay aside our firearms,” Tom said, “as we have already shot five holes through the roof. He is too much in the shadows; we can never hit him. I’ll see if I can’t punch him out of there with this.” Mounting my bed with that frame, he threw it like a harpoon; it went flying through the room, and down at my feet, with a dull, heavy thud, fell the rat. Suddenly he left the open, ran under the bed and up the wall just back of me. Tom struck at him, knocked a brass knob from the top of the bedstead, and the rat ran down the wall near the corner of the room.

“Pull the bed away, Katharine, and I’ll give him a side wipe across the floor that’ll fetch him.”

I sent the bed spinning to the middle of the room, followed it up, and climbed to a chair. The “side wipe” was made; it didn’t fetch him, but it did fetch down an easel and a picture.

“For pity’s sake, Tom, don’t break all the furniture in the house! Let’s go downstairs; don’t let’s kill him tonight!”

“A lot of killing you’re doing!” Tom persisted, prodding under the washstand.

From An Oregon Ranch

"If you're punching for that rat, he isn't there; he's under that couch."

"Did you suppose I was down on all fours poking under that thing for fun? If you'd get off your perch and set that lamp down and come and pull this thing out, I'd get him here."

"Honestly, Tom, I can't. He might run across my feet."

"Well, do you think I want to chase this rat all night?"

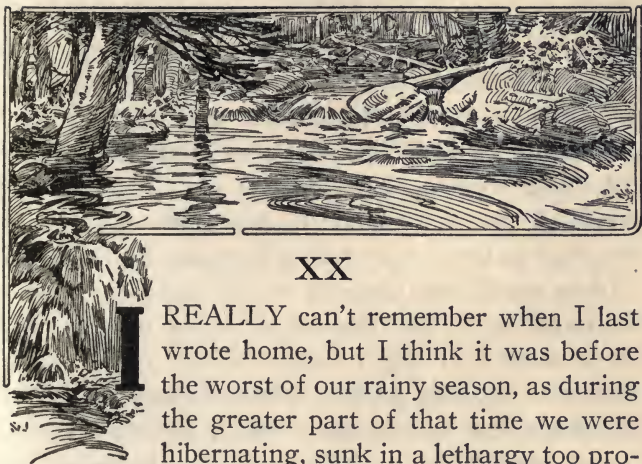
"No, I don't."

"Well, then —"

Here the creature under discussion, taking advantage of the family jar, dashed from his lair, ran across the room, hid behind a pile of magazines, and there met — death.

As the curtain fell upon the last act, the clock struck one. The pursuit began at twelve. It was an hour to be remembered.





XX

I REALLY can't remember when I last wrote home, but I think it was before the worst of our rainy season, as during the greater part of that time we were hibernating, sunk in a lethargy too profound to be disturbed by overflowing pigeonholes of unanswered letters. Our winter was a medley of rain, snow, hail, landslides, and floods—amazing even to the oldest inhabitant, who promptly remarked that he had “seen nothing like it for twenty-five years.” We had fifty-two successive days and nights of rain, with frequent dashes of snow and hail between showers; yet we remained reasonably calm, though the Noahs, I believe, took to the ark after a little dash of forty days.

The winter rains were expected, and were even enjoyed; it was their continuance so far into the spring that palled on us. The last four weeks it

From An Oregon Ranch

rained steadily without variation. Day after day we saw the same drab sky, the same gray rain dolefully slanting across the glen, veiling the hills and shutting out the world—a monotony that not only depressed but stupefied.

All this surplus rain water, together with that caused by the melting of the snow in the mountains, produced fearful high waters and floods. And really I was half glad of it—glad of anything coming to break the dull uniformity of our lives. I was ready just then to reach out a welcoming hand to floods, earthquakes, cyclones, or any other excitement that might happen along.

Deer Leap, our dashing mountain stream, though drinking heavily for some weeks, and rather ominously full, had up to this time kept his bed, showing no particularly riotous spirit. But with the first hint of the coming of the flood he began tossing and tumbling restlessly, and presently he broke loose from his restraining banks and went plunging through the alders and maples, whisking, whirling, and foaming, dealing destruction right and left, demolishing cattle sheds, poultry houses, and pasture fence. He then made a dash for the bridges, destroying one and trying hard for the other, blustering and raging about it for a day and night, hurling great logs against it, savagely bumping the floor, lifting a part of the planks, pulling and pushing and tugging fiercely at it; but though it trembled

From An Oregon Ranch

and swayed, it stood its ground bravely, aided by strong chains lashing it to the trees.

Our meadow looked like a dreary waste. The trees and bushes seemed growing out of a lake. We one day saw fourteen Angora goats carried through this shallow sea. Fortunately they were thrown upon a little knoll in a thicket of briars, where sharp thorns caught their fleecy coats and held them fast until their owner came to the rescue. In being released from their thorny entanglement the poor things were half shorn. Little white flags of mohair still flutter from those bushes in commemoration of the event.

All the known springs were gushing noisily, and many new ones were developing in unheard-of places. One day little streams of water came coursing down the hillside just back of the house, gradually broadening, then soon united, forming a swiftly flowing shallow river of bright orange color—the coloring material furnished, we supposed, by the red soil of Mount Nebo above. It was the strangest sight imaginable, reminding us of the flood at Glen Quharity that Barrie tells of in the story of “The Little Minister.” Indeed, many of the scenes here were as wild as those the “Dominie” looked out upon from the schoolhouse in the Glen.

If Mrs. Noah had great yellow waves of thick muddy water dashing against her habitation, it's no wonder she welcomed the coming of the ark. I told

From An Oregon Ranch

Tom he really must do something, or we should be forced to take to the hills, as I believed the house would be swept into Deer Leap and carried by the high tide down to the Willamette and from there out to sea. Though he said, "I should think you'd like that, you've always wanted a houseboat," he at once began digging canals. When he had finished, he called me out to see how madly the water was dashing through them.

At first I could see nothing but Tom himself—plastered with yellow mud from head to foot, features hidden and hair decorated with it.

A bright thought struck me. "Tom, get the wooden trough out of the milkhouse, and that pole by the alder, and see if you can't shove yourself around a little. I might fancy you a tall and shadowy gondolier, and half believe ourselves in Venice—especially if you would first wash your face."

"Yes, and we'll be in Venice indeed when I make such an idiot of myself as that!"

I've always been sorry that he declined to embark. The current of the lagoon was surprisingly swift, and would have carried his craft into the spring run, which a little lower down in the yard has a fall of five or six feet. To see Mr. Thomas Graham shooting the rapids in the milk trough would have made glad my day, dark as the skies were then.

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During this flood time we often heard the dull roar of the ocean; the wind blew straight from it with the force almost of a hurricane. The house shook in the fierce gusts; great branches of the alders snapped off and came tumbling down in the yard. Occasionally a big tree, uprooted by wind and water, fell with a tremendous crash.

It was fine to hear the rush of wind through the forest, to see the tall firs tossing their plummy heads, wrestling so fiercely with one another that many came out of the fray with broken limbs, and not a few headless. Near the house one broke partly off, lodging against its neighbor. Swaying back and forth in the gale, they made a most hideous, rasping, screeching sound, like the screaming of caged beasts in a menagerie. Tom said those trees would be a treasure for a "shivaree" party—that a resined scantling drawn across a pine box was but an æolian harp in comparison.

In daylight, when one could see what was going on, it wasn't so bad; but at night it was something fearful. There was no light of moon or stars; only darkness and the rush and roar of wind and water, the lashing and swish-swashing of firs, with an accompaniment of shrieks from the crippled one and his fellow sufferer.

Though rather frightened at times, I liked the excitement and exhilaration of all this, and I think Tom and Bert did—if they would admit it. The

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effort to save buildings, fences, bridges, etc., stirred their blood, and gave them something new to think and talk about.

The uneventful days preceding this stormy period were far worse to bear. During ten weeks I never exchanged a word with a neighbor woman, nor even saw one pass; and I saw only three men, all horsemen. The first—a smooth, round-faced, large man, wearing a plaid shawl—was so motherly looking that we set him down as a country doctor. The second rider, gaunt and thin, with a stuffed gunnysack for a saddle, had a bag of flour lying across his steed; we concluded hunger had drawn him from his lair. The last to pass was a stoop-shouldered, hollow-chested stripling, singing “Hold the Fort, for I Am Coming.”

These are the only human beings, outside our own families, that I saw from the last of January until near the middle of April. Tom tells a rather mythical story of seeing emerge from the melancholy yews down in the canyon a shadowy hound, followed by a brown-corduoyed man, who called up to him, “I reckon you hain’t seen no stray Angorys up this way lately?” As this story lacks verification, we think Thomas, by overlong living in the woods, is beginning to “see things.”

In those gloomy days darkness descended upon us about four in the afternoon, making woefully long evenings. At first we were glad, as it gave us

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a chance to read our Christmas books and the piles of magazines and papers saved up from the busy season. After that for a while we enjoyed re-reading our favorites among the old books. Then came a time when the "restless pulse" of ennui could not be quieted even by good literature.

I'll just lift the curtain and give you a glimpse of one of our winter evenings, which will be a fair sample of the other hundred or two. Open wide your eyes and look across the rainy night away up into the dark fir forests of Oregon. Do you see a faint light shining and wavering among the wet leaves? Well, that glimmer is from a student lamp in front of the big stone fireplace of the Ranch of the Pointed Firs. At the left of it, in an old Morris chair, sits Tom, silently and diligently reading. A low willow rocker on the right is occupied by Katharine, also silently and diligently reading. Between the two, upon a black fur rug, still as a shadow, lies Sheila, dreaming of summertime and the whirr of pheasant wings.

Hours pass. The Morris-chair reader lays his book aside, draws nearer the fire, and, replenishing it, remarks that it must be near midnight. Even as he speaks, the clock chimes eight. Katharine closes her book, seeks the opposite chimney corner, and there they sit, like a couple of heathen gods carved in wood, solemnly staring into the fire, which, having just swallowed a fresh dose of turpentine

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and pitch, snaps and crackles so alarmingly that Sheila, suspecting a gun, retires to a distant corner.

Presently the "brazen image" on the left remarks abruptly, "I'm as hungry as a bear; I wish we had some raw oysters!"

"You might as well wish for the apples of Hesperides."

"Just now I prefer the common ones of Oregon. Where are they? I'll get some."

"All gone at the house."

"Great Scott! Then there isn't one on the place, and no more to come until next July."

"And we're twenty miles from oranges and bananas, Tom, and the roads hub-deep with good red Oregon mud."

"I'll buy an airship before I'm a year older!"

Contemplation of the fire is silently resumed; no sound, save a little secret whispering among the flames, the muffled throbbing of rain on the mossy roof, and the steady drip from the overflowing eaves.

"Just listen, Tom! Drip, drip, drip, everlastingly! No wonder the gloom of this thing has crept into our hearts and looks out of our eyes. It's as bad as Chesnywold, in Lincolnshire."

"Not quite—we haven't any Ghosts' Walk!"

"No; but I wish to goodness we had, and that a whole procession of phantoms paraded there nightly, spouting fire and brimstone, winding up with the carmagnole in blue flames."

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"Whew! What's the carmagnole?"

"I don't exactly know—something fiendish, though; and I'd actually be glad to look out at midnight and see a couple of dozen airy apparitions, lit with phosphorus, cutting the pigeon wing under these dripping black firs. We would get a thrill or two at least, and that would be something just now."

"Katharine, are you getting tired of Oregon?"

"Tired of Oregon! You know I love its very name. I'm only tired of sullen skies, rain, mud, myself, and—you."

"Thanks. Your frankness emboldens me to confess that there have been dark moments of late when your society seemed to me to lack something of the charm of the Sorceress of the Nile."

"Very likely. I never set myself up for a sorceress. I know I am stupid; so are you. We need friends, mirth, music, and all that sort of thing; and it wouldn't greatly damage our immortal souls even to see a good play. Oh, Tom! just imagine that we are sitting this very minute in a brilliantly lighted theater, the perfume of flowers in the air, well-dressed people all about us, wealth and beauty in the boxes, waves of melody floating up from the orchestra, one final flourish and crash, and lo! the curtain rises."

Adding more fuel to the fire and carefully brushing the hearth, Tom remarked, "What do you say to cards? We have all the Sarah Battle essentials."

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"Not all, Tom. The 'rigor of the game' would be lacking; for you well know that I always did, do now, and ever shall hate cards."

"Well, then, as gardening time is not far off, suppose we look over a seed catalogue and select such seeds as we shall need."

"Good heavens! A seed catalogue! I want excitement, but I couldn't stand anything quite so hilarious as that."

"I'm sure you have often said there was nothing more fascinating."

"Possibly, when the sun was shining and birds singing; but to sit in this dreariness and watch you slowly turn the pages and hear you ask, 'Now about cucumbers: shall we get the white spine or the long greens? Onions: the yellow Danver is a good onion, don't you think? Radishes: English Breakfast. Didn't we have some seed left over? Beans: I'll order the bunch kind—the Golden Wax, I guess.' Honestly, Tom, I couldn't listen tonight to that lingo, clear through alphabetically from asparagus to watermelons, and live."

"Well, that was my trump card. I've nothing more to offer." Leaning back he began singing—

"I'm wearing awa', Jean,
Like snaw when it's thaw, Jean."

After an interval the doleful one remarks: "I've

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thought of something, Tom, that would be absorbing work, for —

‘There’s nae sorrow there, Jean,
There’s neither could nor care, Jean.’

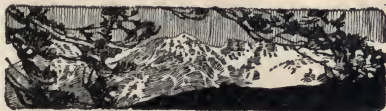
Let’s write a ghost story!”

“All right. I’ve long felt in my bones that I could write a rattling good ghost story. We’ll collaborate.”

“Oh! I think I understand.”

The inspired ones seize pencil and paper, and at once become absorbed in plots and plans. Curtain falls at 8:30 P. M.

We really did try the ghost story. It was about the only fun we had last winter. We wrote alternate chapters, Tom illustrating the whole with pencil sketches. It is a work of almost supernatural power, and destined to live, we think, and rank with the really great literature of the world. It will appear about the holidays—some other year.





XXI

AFTER the slackening of the winter rains, which I tried to picture to you in my last letter, there came an aftermath of light showers and lovely mists, soft, filmy, floating-about-the-mountain mists. Nothing else in all these beautiful Oregon hills seems quite so near and dear to me as these mists, so sympathetic, so companionable, and yet so indescribable; a witchery of nature, too changeful and elusive to be caught by words. I cannot tell you how much I love them, nor how strangely they appeal to my better self. Often, when annoyed by household cares, and the many —

“Little sharp vexations,
The briers that catch and fret,”

I look out of my kitchen window and see these tender gray mists quietly rising from the encircling

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hills, like clouds of incense to the Great Spirit. Tears "rise in my heart and gather to my eyes," my rebellious mood is softened, my worries slip away, peace steals into my heart, and I am comforted and helped as by the silent sympathetic pressure of the hand of a friend. I cannot analyze the mysterious charm of these dreamy, brooding shadows, nor define what it is they say to me, nor make clear even to myself the secret of their silent ministry. I only know they soothe and tranquillize and restore. Perhaps the Father, mindful of the solitariness of his mountain children, sends these soft winds of peace to hover over them, in token of His unforgetting love and care.

If through an unkind fate I should suffer banishment from this land of enchantment, I know I should be homesick day and night for the "Sisters of the gray veil," as Tom calls them. He often comes in saying, "The gray veils have camped among the firs today," or "The Sisters of the gray veil are climbing the hills this morning," and somehow the name satisfies my sense of kinship with them.

About this time I enjoyed some delightful walks with my new acquaintance, the young lady who gave me Sheila. She had just returned from a distant ranch where she had gone to spend the holiday season, and where she had been imprisoned by high waters for many weeks. We call this young lady

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"Di Vernon," because of her adventurous spirit and love of out-door life. We met her once or twice soon after our arrival here, but before we had become fairly acquainted she went to visit friends in Colorado, where she remained many months, and we did not meet again until about a year ago. If she had been at home during our long winter, we should have been less lonely, as she, in short skirts and rubber boots, roams these hills quite regardless of the weather.

Three dogs are her inseparable companions—Texas, a great fierce fellow, with a deep and terrible voice; Shady, a hound, lean, lank, and brown—as his name implies; and June, a Scotch collie. The latter is a beauty, yellow and white in color, and clean, fluffy, and fringy, like a prize chrysanthemum; she has a pretty face, too, with big, luminous brown eyes, set in a tiny circle of black, as if she had coquetishly touched them up with India ink. I really believe there is no handsomer dog in Oregon—with one notable exception.

Miss Vernon rides a fleet little Indian pony, without a saddle—just a surcingle, with stirrup attached. She uses a queer sort of bridle, with reins of braided rawhide, and a cruel-looking curb bit; and, strangest of all, she rides with a spur. When I first caught a glimpse of her shoe embellished with that shining metal wheel, I grew fairly dizzy. But, oh, how she rides! Flying along at a furious pace,

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leaping over logs and even fences, how she manages to stick on is a mystery to me.

The hill women all ride, and ride well, using only the surcingle, though sometimes it is buckled around a blanket or a sheepskin. The only sidesaddle we have seen here came up from the valley, and we all looked upon it with contempt. You may think that as they ignore the saddle they have adopted the modern method of riding astride; but they haven't. Such dashing horsemanship among women has greatly astonished us, and our interest in it never wanes. When I hear galloping hoofs, and see through the trees the flash of a sunbonnet or streaming veil, I stand stock-still in admiration.

But I am straying far from our own particular enchantress, who greatly surprised us during her first call. In speaking of this isolated life, I had asked what her amusements were here.

"Oh, I ride, fish, and hunt, and I'm fond of dogs and horses, and as we have a lot of them I spend a good deal of my time with them. I always help break the bunchgrassers, and that's exciting."

Bunchgrassers! I had never before heard that word, and wondered if she could possibly mean jack-rabbits. I have never seen any, but have always associated them with bunchgrass. But why should they want to break them? I kept still and waited for light.

When I had learned that she was talking of

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horses, I made bold to ask, "Why bunchgrassers?" and was told they were horses that had been running wild on the range.

Tom, who had been an interested listener to all this, asked her if she could wield the lasso.

"Oh, yes," she replied; "my father taught me that when I was quite a young girl, though I don't pretend to be an expert."

While she discussed horsebreaking methods with Tom, I looked at her in amazement. It was hard to reconcile such deeds with the doer. She was "like the hazel twig, straight and slender, and as brown as hazel nuts," with a pleasant voice, a charming smile, a frank, cordial manner, entirely free from self-consciousness; was well gowned in dark blue cloth, wore a Rough Rider hat of tan color, with gauntlets to match, and tucked in her belt was a yellow daffodil.

As she discoursed enthusiastically of ropes, thongs, slipknots, and nooses, I remembered that only a few minutes before in our talk she had quoted from "The Birds of Killingworth" and from "The Bonnie Brier Bush" and so my wonder grew.

When she left us we sat for a moment looking at each other dumbly. Then Tom remarked, "Exit Saint Cecilia, the female bronco buster."

"Aren't you ashamed, Tom, to speak in that way of one of my visitors?"

"Why, no, Katharine—I meant that as a com-

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pliment. Though she talked of the overturning of wild horses, she certainly looked the gentlest of saints. She is a new type, and I like her immensely. She's a thousand times more interesting than such girls as we have known, talking eternally of receptions and clubs, of whist and theater parties, of pink teas and green luncheons, color schemes that were poems, and gowns that were dreams, and that sort of gush. Now this girl is a real Di Vernon, a novelty, and a most refreshing one."

Tom had hit upon a name that seemed rightfully to belong to her, and we have called her by it ever since. We have learned that she is a very successful trout fisher, and as a discoverer of bee trees has no equal in the hills. She has no fear of bees, and always helps to take the honey; is a fine marksman — has a rifle and a shotgun of her own, and can bag as many pheasants and quail as her brother or uncle when out with them on a hunting trip. She often goes with them coon-hunting at night, when it is so dark they have to carry lanterns. Once when she was out hunting alone in our woods, the dogs got on the track of a wildcat, chased it half the morning, and finally treed it. She followed them, found it high among the branches, fired, and brought it down.

"Of course, Di, you kept its skin for a rug?"

"No; sold it."

"You foolish girl! Why did you?"

"Oh, to get some more money to buy some more

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ammunition to kill some more wildcats!" she answered laughingly.

I am very sorry to tell you that a few years ago she killed a deer—her first, and, I am glad to say, her last. In telling me of it she said, "Never again while I live will I point a gun toward a deer; for that poor thing, as it lay dying, turned its beautiful head in my direction, and two big reproachful eyes looked me squarely in my face, and I felt myself the cruel murderess that I was. I had no pride in that shot. I went home ashamed and in tears, haunted by those dying eyes. But I've saved the life of many a one since in atonement for that crime."

"How, Di?"

"Very easily—just by misdirecting their pursuers. You know there is a regular deer run on our place, and many a time when I have been strolling through the fields or along the banks of the stream I've seen one of those poor frightened creatures come flying out of the woods with death at its heels, clear the brook at a bound, and, though ready to drop from exhaustion, not daring to pause even a second for a drop of pure water to cool its throat. The hunters are seldom far behind, and when they come crashing through the underbrush and see me, they naturally ask whether I have seen the deer and which way it ran. That's my opportunity, and I rise to meet it.

"The deer? Yes, I saw it about three minutes

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ago. It jumped this stream where that alder stands and ran straight up the canyon.' Or, 'It ran across the meadow, leaped the fence, and entered the opposite woods just between those two tall dead firs.'

"'Oh, thank you, Miss! thank you!' they gasp excitedly, as they dash off—in the wrong direction. I suppose I ought to suffer remorse for the lie I have told, but I don't; I know that I have saved the life of a hunted wild thing, and I feel glad to my finger tips."

Our young lady knows these hills and woods and streams like a book. She knows the haunts of the wild flowers, but not always their names—to my regret, for, not learning them of her, I despair of learning them at all. She it was who told us of the rhododendrons and where they grew; it was four miles farther back in the mountains; a part of the way there was no road, only a tangled trail, the last half-mile straight up. Though eager to go at once to that field Elysian, my ardor cooled somewhat as I thought of the walk of eight miles, part of it a straight climb, with active housework before and after taking. I decided the rhododendrons of the mountains must come to Mahomet. And come they did; for Bert, after hearing of them, never really enjoyed a good night's rest until he had scaled the heights crowned by those blushing rose trees. He returned from his trip late in the evening, footsore and weary, but glowing with enthusiasm, declaring

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he had seen the most wonderful sight in all the world. "Fully a half-acre of those magnificent blooms! Just think of it!—a pink-canopied island in a sea of green!"

He had carried a great armload of their flowery branches all that distance, and for the next ten days "rose-pink rhododendron bells, with narrow leaves of satin's sheen," glorified and illumined this old box-house.

We were surprised and pleased to find our new friend a most intelligent and appreciative reader of good literature. The books in her home, though few, are of the best, and have been so thoroughly and thoughtfully read that she seems to know them by heart. She is a good comrade, and we enjoyed many delightful walks during the time of mists of which I have written. As there were still frequent showers, and the ground was well soaked by the winter rains, I followed her example, donning a pair of rubber boots which Tom had bought for me to wear during "snake week."

A rainy-day walk in town is an uncomfortable experience compared with our free-and-easy hill excursions. We wear old soft felt hats, and our most disreputable jackets, and gowns with skirts reaching but little below our boot tops. Unhampered by gloves and umbrellas, we swing along with the mist in our faces, as happy as gypsies. Four barking dogs go frisking ahead, so insanely gleeful

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they must needs run back very often to leap on us with muddy feet, just to ask if this isn't a lark and if we aren't glad they let us come.

As we skirt the red-furrowed fields, hugging the old rail fence for the sake of a grassy path, frightened quails go scurrying off through the tall weeds and tangled briars, while from near-by thickets, with a rush of wings that is almost a roar, startled China pheasants fly up and over, croaking as hoarsely as though an epidemic of sore throat were raging among them.

Our footpath leads straight to the woods, the entrance barred only by a few mossy poles. We slide back the two middle ones, and gracefully tumble through the opening. Our impatient four-footed friends, who long before had leaped that barrier, plunging into the forest's fringing undergrowth, were doubtless already engaged in a still hunt, as no sound came from them. As we struggle through the dripping bushes, rejoicing in both their baptism and their benediction, and enter the dusky atmosphere of the real woods, where the stately trees stand in crowded columns, and catch that first cool wave of scented silence, we are apt to talk compassionately of city-dwellers, all heaped and huddled together, with nothing but a little carpentry or masonry between them. I think of all such pityingly, as I stand in the solitude of the pointed firs, crushing their green aromatic needles in my hands, bury-

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ing my face in them to catch their fullest and sweetest perfume; and then I thank the kindly star that guided us across plain and desert and mountain into these glorious hills of Oregon.





XXII

I WANT to tell you something more about our walks. Tom and I have a couple of light, tough cedar alpenstocks, which we regard as very helpful in hill climbing; and I like them for another reason. In the end of each is a very sharp spike, which I have secretly thought would be of service if I should chance to meet one of the furry folk of the forest and find it necessary to engage him in single-handed combat.

When Di Vernon joined me on these excursions, it seemed but courteous to offer her one of them. She carried it twice; on its third presentation she remarked, "If it won't hurt your feelings, I'd rather not take that pole." Pole, indeed! my nice, smooth, sand-papered, cedar alpenstock! Rather chagrined, I asked, "Why? Don't you like it?" "No; I don't care much for it. You see, I'm accustomed to the

From An Oregon Ranch

hills, have climbed them from childhood, and I really have no use for it." I had observed that she carried it like a music roll—under her arm.

"I'll venture to say," she added, "that you never have seen a native of the hills walking with one of these poles; only newcomers carry them."

Though humbled by this "plain talk to plain people," I had my own reasons for clinging to my "pole," and so I clung. I find, however, that I carry it less like a flagstaff, and note a growing tendency to trail it.

The walks here are all so interesting that we often have difficulty in deciding which to take. We sometimes leave it to the dogs. If they scamper away across the sodden, spongy meadow, we know they are bound for the canyon, and we cheerfully follow them.

Near the stream we enter a narrow, winding path, padded with brown wet leaves, bordered by willow, maple, ash, and alder trees; while crowding among these grow smaller trees—wild cherry, Indian peach, chittam vine bark, and hazel, with elder, wild syringa, currant and blackberry bushes; the wild rose, too, with an infinite variety of other shrubs that love to haunt the banks of Deer Leap.

This difficult path is made even more difficult in places by curving boughs of vine maple and the palm-like branches of young firs. We must needs advance crouchingly here, hoisting the green, sag-

From An Oregon Ranch

ging roof above our heads, learning through its showery protests that sagging is not its only defect.

Soon after escaping from this troublesome tangle, we enter the dusky atmosphere of the big trees. This canyon, Nell, is a wild and eerie region, a veritable "ghoul-haunted woodland of wier," just the place for hobgoblins and spooks. I avoid hugging the trees lest a withered arm with bony hand should reach round and clutch me.

So far we have seen nothing more awesome than solemn brown owls perched high among the firs, silent and meditative as cowled monks. Occasionally at our approach one slips noiselessly away, though oftener he sits motionless, staring down with tragic eyes.

Here, there, and everywhere among these towering trees lie fallen ones. Some have tumbled head first into the canyon, their mighty roots, with tons of earth, reared high in air—a hanging garden where green mosses grow, with low bushes, trailing vines, and even fine young firs, promising scions of a lordly race. Across these, other unfortunates have fallen rampant, while still others are stretched prone upon the ground, half buried in the thick woodland *débris*.

Here, too, are trees left headless and otherwise disfigured by fierce winds; and many fire sufferers also. Their jagged trunks, painted in motley colors, are left in shapes both fantastic and wonderful—

From An Oregon Ranch

strange resemblances to man and beast, suggestive of the skill of some wandering wood carver.

The dullest fancy must see in this burnt-wood exhibit the sculptured majesty of King Lear and the picturesquely posed Huguenot lovers; also our soldiers' monuments, where, poised upon a broken column, stands a fine military figure in full uniform, even to hat, epaulettes, and sword. Believing him to be a cavalry officer, we have named him General Forrest.

And, Nell, through a vista of trees may be seen emerging from the opposite wood a lady of most aristocratic bearing, wearing a picture hat with sweeping plumes of black, and a long black cloak bordered with silvery gray fur. As she stands in a twilighty place, she is known as Our Lady of the Gloaming.

I shall not expect you to believe the half of this, unless you yourself have somewhere seen the strange carvings and colorings of the fire artist.

This art gallery of Nature's is half screened from our path by naked branches of young oaks, through which a rain of gray moss is falling, giving an agreeable touch of desolation to our surroundings. For your sake, I am willing to admit that forest statuary seen through so ghostly a drop curtain may, from its vagueness, possibly receive an extra dash of glamour.

The farther up the canyon we go the denser and

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darker grow the woods. In that time of rain and mist it was often almost like night there, and still as death, unless the dogs got on track of some wild thing and set the echoes flying. In that case the yelping and yowling of Shady, the hound, must have made even the wood nymphs strike for tall timber.

Sometimes through a small clearing we catch a glimpse of "high Cromla's head piercing dark clouds, with squally winds in their skirts," and see gray mists rolling stormily through the hills. That picture, with the roar of the mountain stream, is like a page from Ossian. The pool of memory is stirred. Half unconsciously we listen for the trembling harp strings and tuneful voices of "aged bards with gray hair on the breeze," for the horn of the hunter, and the clash of steely mail.

If from out the tall pointed firs should come "slowly stalking dark-browed warriors with bossy shields and helmeted heads, with red eyes rolling silently," I'd blanch not, only stand with spiked pole uplifted and await the onslaught. As for those very thin, dim ghosts of Ardven, with robes of flying mist, I'd fear them as little "as the rising breeze that whirls the gray beard of the thistle."

Having once surrendered to the mood inspired by the wild scenery of my beloved Oregon hills, I should feel little surprise, if, at the next turn of our winding trail, we came face to face with "the fair

From An Oregon Ranch

maids of Woody Worven, with hair like the mist on Cromla, when it curls in the breeze and shines in the sun." And even less should I be surprised, if through the tall fern thickets surrounding us should appear "the branching heads of dark brown hinds, flying from stern hunters with bows of bended yew and the panting gray dogs—long-bounded sons of the chase."

Di, as a devotee of Scott, thinks the stage setting calls for kilted Highlanders, with plumed bonnets and tasseled horns, for red-faced monks and jolly friars, for winding bugles, baying hounds, screaming bagpipes, and all that sort of thing.

Farther up the canyon at the right of our path is a deep cleft in the hills, and there in a most romantic spot a spring of pure, sparkling water gushes from encircling mossy rocks half hidden by ferns and buckthorn.

We always make a detour through this picturesque glen to drink of this water from cups fashioned of leaves. We could, of course, bring with us a more satisfactory drinking cup, but that would savor too much of civilization—a thing we cannot brook.

Oh, Nell, if only you could see this crystal spring and its wild environment! I'm sure it would suggest to you, as to us, the "fairy well haunted by the White Lady." One has but to imagine that overshadowing buckthorn to be holly—which it

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so closely resembles—and the illusion is complete.

Standing there one day, I said to Di, "I have a mind to call up an apparition, if you think you can look on it and live."

Stepping forward, bowing solemnly to holly and spring, I repeated the well-known incantation—

"Thrice to the holly brake,
Thrice to the well,
I bid thee awake,
White Maid of Avenel!"

But to my chagrin that golden-girdled spirit failed to appear.

"The Lady seems not to be at home, Di."

"No wonder. You forgot a very important part of the spell. Now watch me." Thereupon that intrepid damsel stalked through the oozy moss to the very edge of the fountain, where, with clasped hands and "red eyes rolling" wildly about the glen, she muttered, "It is the place, the season, and the hour!"

Then, gravely removing the rubber boot from her right foot, balancing herself on the left, she bowed as impressively as could be expected from one in that stork-like attitude, thrice to the holly and thrice to the well, invoking the spirit in tones more awful than those of the ghost in "Hamlet," using both verses of the charm to make all sure. Again we

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waited. Nothing was seen, nothing heard, save the hurrying waters of Deer Leap.

"By my knightly word, this is strange!" exclaimed the petitioner, drawing on her boot. "Though I bethink me now I should have brought hither me good steel blade, or, lacking that, should at least have waved a bulrush or a hazel wand."

"If you'd like to try again, Di, and think a cedar—"

"Good gracious! Do you think I'd try to lure a wood maiden from her haunts with a spiked pole? Anyway, come to think about it, I don't want her to appear, for now we have the freedom of her drawing room, and can stare around to our hearts' content."

Mother Nature doesn't mind us; she knows that we are just a couple of tired mortals from out the workaday world, who have strayed into her leafy courts for an hour's forgetfulness of the fever called living; knows, too, that the air of her great sanitarium is apt slightly to affect the brain of her visitors; has learned to expect nonsense, and to accept it with placid indifference.

But even the sanest could hardly stand in this deep, narrow ravine and not think of a city drawing room in gala day attire.

Across the lower end hangs a leafy *portière*; through its seine-like meshes flash the silvery waters of Deer Leap, the upper one banked high with firs

From An Oregon Ranch

and hemlock; a charming background for the fern-fringed fountain, its entire floor carpeted with thick green moss, which extends up the side walls, forming an effective dado; logs and stumps upholstered in the same material—massive divans and hassocks—scattered conveniently about, awaiting the arrival of our lady's guests, the merry foresters.

When I speak of mossy logs, Nell, you mustn't think they are like ours at home, splotched here and there with that thin, dry, scaly stuff. Here, in the rainy season, they are swathed in it, as completely hidden as if slipped into cases of—I was going to say plush, but that's too smooth and shiny for this intricate moss; fashioned of millions of tiny, twisted, curving ferns, it looks more like curled astrakhan or some rich fur.

We lifted a piece of the White Lady's carpet, about a square yard, just to see if she could turn it when she cleaned house, carefully replacing it, you may be sure, patting down the edges that the desecration might not be noted, and, oh, how beautiful it was, Nell! Nature couldn't make a lovelier thing if she tried! Heavy as a fleece of wool, so deep and so soft, as luxurious to eye and touch as any Persian prayer rug.

Now you are saying, "Katharine doesn't know a blessed thing about a Persian prayer rug!" You are mistaken. Haven't I read that beautiful poem of Mr. Aldrich's, describing his, beginning—

From An Oregon Ranch

“Made smooth some centuries ago
By praying Eastern devotees,
Blurred by those dusky, naked feet,
And somewhat worn by shuffling knees
In Ispahan.”

Now what do you think? And that's not all. I once saw one with my own eyes at the World's Fair in Chicago, guarded by a red-turbaned, saffron-tinted gentleman, of countenance so sinister I thought as I looked at him, "My Yellow Peril, no prayer rug is ever going to suffer much wear and tear through your devotional exercises!" Now see how far afield I am! I honestly believe an incredulous friend is a sharper trial than a thankless child!

We one day found a perfect little bracket shelf, just the color of old ivory, its outer surface all written over with a fine tracery of sepia-tinted hieroglyphics. We half feared, as we pried and pulled it from the tree, that we were carrying off a love sonnet in secret cipher left there by some forest-haunting Orlando of the hills for his elusive Rosalind.

This was Di's find. Not long ago I saw it in her dining room, fastened to the wall and holding a little squatty brown and yellow jug, from which trailed two or three pretty nasturtium vines, with their flaming blossoms.

From An Oregon Ranch

Another time we took from an old stump a most striking facsimile of the bust of Shakespeare. It was of plastic material, much like paraffine wax, only cameo-tinted, and exquisite. As this was my discovery, I brought it home and gave it a background of black velvet.

But I must stop this rambling talk, and I will stop right now, by wishing you a happy Christmas and a glad New Year. I came near forgetting it. It is hard to realize the nearness of the holiday season, when one lives in the woods, hearing no Christmas talk, seeing none of the flutter and excitement of it, and the weather so far from Christmasy.

For several days dense fogs have enveloped the land. Today even the hills are blotted out, and the fog creeping nigher has built a high wall of gray around yard and orchard—one we can neither see through nor over. We feel like castaways on some lonely island, with the vague sea about us.

And yet we know somewhere beyond this grayness Christmas bells are ringing and Christmas carols singing.

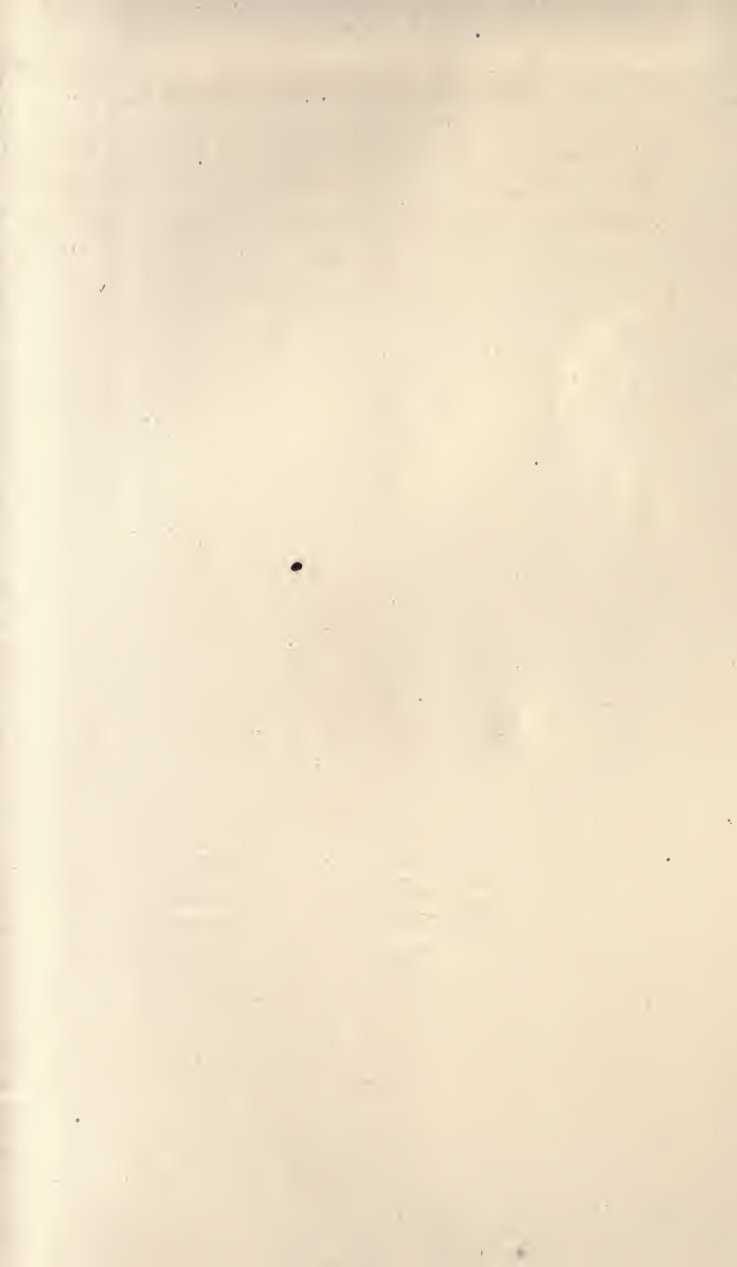
You'll keep the day with festal cheer, and be tonight in a whirl of festivity. We'll have the biggest, crackliest, snappiest Yule log we can find, and the brightest blaze a Rochester burner can produce—and then what? Why, just let me tell you. Three brand-new books, a dozen magazines, sent us some weeks ago by a blessed saint and kept by us as a

From An Oregon Ranch

special treat for the holiday season! I can hardly wait till night. Just to think of those new books with uncut pages gives me a kindly "peace on earth, good will to man" feeling.

Good-bye. God bless us, every one!





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